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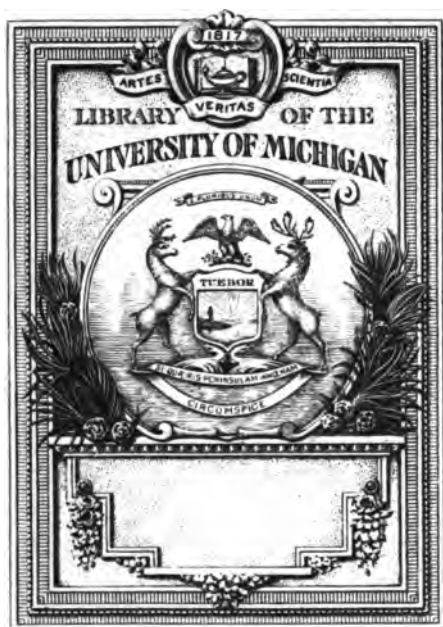
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TO BLAME**

ELIZABETH BIBESCO

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BY
ELIZABETH RIBESCO

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**I HAVE ONLY MYSELF
TO BLAME**

I HAVE ONLY MYSELF TO BLAME

I

I HAVE ONLY MYSELF TO BLAME

I HAVE only myself to blame." She had said it to herself so often that, once she set the words going they went on repeating themselves automatically till she forced herself to turn them off as if they were a gramophone record. In a way they had ceased to mean anything, but she tried to give their sense back to them by repeating each word slowly, and forcibly concentrating her mind.

"Myself, myself, myself," she said. Self-accusation had become her one form of relaxation.

There had been so many reasons why she shouldn't marry him, and only one reason why she should—if it could be called a reason.

She was the first person he had ever loved. He had trembled when he touched her. His spasms of passion had been like spasms of pain, his face contorted and his voice rough, and then there had followed intervals of wretched shyness. When he had

thought of possessing her he had become a saint waiting for a divine manifestation. It was this transforming of an ordinary physiological fact into a miracle that won her. She could see inevitability—in desire, in triumph, in failure. Hers was the man's attitude. He lifted her into the region of the ridiculous and the sublime.

"Your privacy is sacred," he said. "Everything that you give me is divine. But it is a gift. I have no rights."

She could not resist the thought of being married to a monk. He had made no vows concerning her spirit, her mind, her habits. These he was free to violate. Here he must insist on asserting himself.

She hadn't thought of that. . . .

All her friends tried to dissuade her. They told her—some delicately, some violently—things about him that she knew better than they did.

"I like his attitude towards women," she sometimes explained wearily.

"My dear! What a reason! You of all people."

"Just so," she said.

Now there was a conspiracy of silence. No one said anything ever.

"My life has become a sort of solitary confinement," she laughed drearily.

Their tact and her loyalty barred the doors.

And he was a success! He was a member of

Parliament and a writer of magazine stories. Of most of them she was—avowedly—the heroine. He dexterously hinted it in interviews and blatantly proclaimed it in conversation—graciously, a furnace of rage burning behind her eyes, she accepted it as a toast. One of his most successful stories had been called “Countess Cherie,” and thus his friends playfully addressed her. It branded her, and she was glad to be bathed by her friends with the cool water of her own Christian name.

And all the time she was bound to him by some indefinable physical tie—not her passion for him, but his reverence for her—or rather for her body. She wondered if what she gave into his tender delicate keeping atoned for the things he stole and broke.

To-night every nerve was crying out “no” while those eternal six words “I have only myself to blame,” hummed an accompaniment.

She was waiting for him in her charming boudoir. He had come in late from the House and was dressing for dinner—he always dressed for dinner.

In a detached way she was enjoying the firelight and her own apricot tea-gown, but she was too much annoyed with him for changing to enjoy either very much. Why couldn’t he have come in as he was?

The door opened and he appeared—very immaculate. She would have felt more forgiving had he been more untidy.

"I must apologise for having kept you waiting."

"You shouldn't have changed."

"I disapprove of a man who thinks he can be as dirty and untidy as he likes, simply because he is at home. Besides," he took her hand and kissed it, "I like to show some consideration for my wife."

How well she knew this comedy of formality that was his idea of fine manners.

Dinner was announced. He gave her his arm.

"A very good wine, my Catherine." He sipped his claret.

"It is always like that. Everything that belongs to him he consecrates by possessing it," she thought angrily.

He enjoyed the dinner and his own conversation. By including her in his complacency he did his duty to his wife.

"I met Henry Donald to-day and asked him to come in after dinner. He is staying the night at his club instead of going back to the country."

"No wonder, with a wife like that to go back to."

"Mrs. Donald is a friend of mine." He had got his stern smile-proof look.

"Possibly. But hardly a favourite of his. I can't think why he married her, though I suppose her two thousand pounds a year made a great difference to him at that time."

"Catherine, I forbid you to say such coarse, cruel things. Henry is devoted to his wife."

"Well, if he were it would be to his discredit."

She realised what a particularly silly argument it was.

"I could almost hate you when you talk like that."

"And I have no redeeming two thousand a year."

His look of horror disarmed her a little.

"Don't look so horrified. It would be very nice if I had."

"I hope I am able to support my wife."

"I think you stand her wonderfully well, on the whole."

"That was not what I meant." She had made him too cross to be bantered back into sunniness.

"Don't you wish she spent a little more on her clothes? Her shoes always look as if they were recommended by a chiropodist."

He did not smile.

"Mrs. Donald is a good, loyal, simple woman. As the wife of a very dear friend of mine she is sacred to me."

"Well, I could wish for his sake that she were a little more secular and alluring."

"Catherine," his voice was firm, "there are certain things that I have the right to exact from my wife: one is that she should keep her bitter tongue off my friends."

"And their wives and their cousins and their mistresses."

"Catherine!"

"Didn't you know that people had mistresses?"

"Mr. Donald!" The announcement was a relief.

"Good evening, Mr. Donald. I am so glad to see you."

"You have come just in time for some port. A most excellent wine. You will not be allowed to smoke until you have finished it."

Horace was in his element. He revelled in his duties as a host. He knew what wine should be drunk with which fish, and the Lord Chamberlain himself had not a more accurate knowledge of the laws of precedence. He enjoyed offering his arm to the lady of highest rank, even if she were one of his wife's supercilious relations. He liked the sight of diamonds and the sound of titles—though fortunately he had never connected these pleasures with their source. Above all, he loved the moment when, alone with the men, he could push round the decanters, offer cigars of varying lengths and equal though different perfection, and dominate the conversation. He liked to tell a good story and even to listen to one. His love of a prompt retort was not confined to those he made himself. He was genuinely fond of his fellow-creatures, loyal to his friends and ready to do a good turn to anyone. He had a

rigid sense of honour which consisted of variations on the theme of "You should never hit a man when he is down"; "You should never question a servant"; "You should not look at the envelopes of your wife's letters." When he lost a game he was always the first to congratulate the winner with the invariable formula "The best man won." Victorious, he never omitted to say "You were a bit off colour, old chap," to his defeated opponent. He preferred cricket and rugby to lawn tennis and golf. "Team work, there's nothing like it," was his watchword. He believed in a judicious mixture of armaments and economy, imperialism and free trade. He believed in the weakness of women, he believed in not believing in God. He was shocked by corporal punishment and prostitution, and he had never quite been able to make up his mind about vivisection. He thought Freud an impostor. He loved animals, he was on the wine committee of his club. He was a good son, a good brother, a good husband, a good citizen and a good friend.

Of all these things Catherine was devastatingly conscious. She watched the two men and listened to them in a desultory dispassionate way. Their conversation was so full of nicknames that it reminded her of the social letter in the "Tatler." Some of them she suspected were inaccurate. Unimpeachable Johns and Williams became Jacks and

Bills. A well-known feminist whose "Margaret" was a trumpet call to continents emerged from a wrapping of "Maggie." The Chancellor of the Exchequer as "Toddles" was revealed by subsequent side-lights. "Why should I mind? What does it matter? Why do I listen?" thought Catherine. "My chatterbox is very silent." Horace laid his hand on hers, "and she knows she only enjoys herself when she is talking a lot."

"Don't mind him, Mrs. Little. He is jealous of your superior conversational gifts."

Don't mind him; don't mind him, she reflected. What excellent advice. She smiled.

"How is your wife?" she inquired.

"Much better, Mrs. Little, much better, thank you. She is looking forward to paying her respects to you when she comes to town."

Why did he keep repeating her name like a nursery governess?

"And the children?" she persisted.

"Very well, thank you. Charley-boy is going to school next term."

"How dreadful for his poor mother."

"Well, it will be rather a wrench for her, Mrs. Little, but the time has come for him to be made a man of."

There was a pause. Catherine thought, "Why does one always want to listen and to interrupt at

the same time if one is amused, or to do neither if one isn't?"

Horace thought, "She always tries to make my friends seem dull."

Henry thought, "Charming feminine woman, Mrs. Little, but dashed if I've ever seen any of that wit people talk about."

"Shall you send your daughter to school, too, or have a governess?" Catherine painfully pursued the topic of the young Donalds' education which interested no one, not even their father.

"It's a very difficult question, isn't it? Rather lonely for an only girl and yet one doesn't want to send her to a school where she might er—hear things."

The hesitation and the blush were too much for Catherine.

"You ought to talk to her quite frankly," she said firmly, "facts are only disgusting if they are hinted at and sniggered at and veiled, so that they become the centre of perverted imaginings and ignorant curiosity."

Horace was horrified by the turn the conversation had taken.

"By the way," he intervened hastily ("what way," she wondered) "I met your uncle Wrotham in the street."

"Who with?"

"Miss Gardiner."

"A sweetly pretty girl." Henry was glad to be off the rocks. "I saw Lord Wrotham escort her onto the terrace the other day. A charming picture they made. He is a most magnificent looking man."

"They are certainly amazingly alike."

"They are surely not related?" Henry could easily have graduated for the College of Heralds.

Catherine raised her eyebrows. "Oh, didn't you know? She is his daughter."

"Really, Catherine, how can you talk in such a disgusting way about your uncle."

Horace was furious. "But it isn't disgusting. Uncle George lived with Mrs. Gardiner for years. Everyone knows—why shouldn't he, poor man? His wife has been shut up as a lunatic for ages."

"She is still his wife in the eyes of the law."

"Really, Horace, considering that you don't believe in God you really have taken on all the intolerance of all the churches in the world."

Again they had reached an impasse. One of Horace's rules of behaviour was "Never argue with your wife in the company of a third person." He couldn't begin a "by-the-way" again, and he was profoundly grateful when Henry said:

"Life is full of tragedies. We should try to judge charitably."

This unanswerable truth created a new silence,

broken first by Horace offering his guest a cigar, and then by Catherine asking if the telephone rates were really to be raised?

"I know I shall start talking about venereal diseases if this atmosphere lasts much longer," she said to herself.

At last Henry rose to say good-night. The relief at his impending departure brought a rush of conversation. Suddenly they were all full of things they were longing to say. Speaking all together they shouted one another down, laughing and talking twenty to the dozen. Drowned in the noisy cordiality of their good-byes, Henry took his departure. Horace came back into the room and shut the door. This, as his wife knew, was the herald of a scene. Yawning and stretching herself, she set light to his anger. "God, what an evening! I was too bored even to listen to what I was saying myself."

"You were lucky. I unfortunately heard every word you said."

"I must apologise for having been almost as dull as Mr. Donald. Such is infection."

"Henry is an excellent fellow and a charming companion. With your amiable desire to distress and embarrass my friends I realise that you deliberately chose to discuss such enthralling topics as the sexual education of girls and your uncle's bastards."

"What extraordinary language you use about my

poor cousins, but if I talked too much about my family, I am sorry. It is a most tiresome habit."

Deliberately she was infuriating him, drawling at him with perfect control of her temper.

"You will please realise that I am master in my own house," he asserted irrelevantly.

"Of course, dear. Let us go to bed."

He strode to the door and locked it.

"Not until you have apologised."

"I apologise." She was smiling at him a calm, amused smile.

He strode back to the door and unlocked it.

"Thank you." She bowed her head as she left the room. The gesture of a queen in a carriage. He was frustrated, impotent, furious. "She deserves to be smacked," he said to himself, and then remembered that no man ever struck a woman.

She undressed and wondered whether he would come up to bed. She felt very tired and the evening had been a complete failure. She had behaved childishly and in a way that she was forced to admit was rapidly becoming characteristic. In a way Henry ought to have helped them. She had absolutely nothing to say to her husband when they were alone. She heard Horace's footsteps on the stairs. He paused and knocked at her door.

"You baby," he said, "how young you look with

your hair down. May I sit in your armchair for a moment?"

She pushed it nearer the fire and got on to his knee. With the curling capacity of a cat she fitted herself into his arms. Suddenly she began to cry.

"Horace," she said, "I'm so lonely, so terribly lonely."

He kissed her and soothed her and mesmerised her. Then he lifted her into bed. She dreamt that she and Horace and Lord Wrotham and Miss Gardiner and Freud were talking about girls' schools and then Henry arrived, saying "Here is Toddles," and Horace said, "We will not pollute this port with smoke," and she answered, "I have only myself to blame."

II

TO-MORROW

THE half-hour of crowded anticipation, how fully it pays for the sterile hour that follows! What you possess is not what you jingle in the pockets of your memory, but the imaginings with which you fill the spaces of the future. Reality can never touch them, yet of such are the Kingdom of Life.

* * * * *

This was the moment she must enjoy. These minutes before he arrived, when their glorious happy hour together—usually so unhappy when it came—was still to come. Once he is there she can hear nothing but the clock ticking the beats of her heart, tolling the knell of each minute. The past will seem to be capturing the present at an overwhelming rate. She can never enjoy being with him for the knowledge that they will so soon be separated, and what is worse, separate, walking down different streets, talking to different people, thinking different thoughts. Her heart will stop beating when she sees him post a letter and realises that she will never know what is in it.

But to-day *must* be perfect, it is the last time for so long. She must try to keep calm and amus-

ing and alluring, as she had been in the days before she loved him, the days when he had loved her best. She mustn't allow the edge to come from her nerves into her voice; she mustn't make those desperate irrelevant grabs at certainty. She begins to feel faint and sick and too restless to sit down, and yet she must be in a chair when he arrives and have something to hold on to, something to give her poise. Every now and then she looks into a glass, but can only see a white blur, and feeling the back of her head with her hands, she detaches the hairs she means to smooth.

She tries to focus her attention by nailing her eyes on to her little silver feet. "I wonder if I am looking pretty?" she thinks, desperately; and still more desperately, "I wonder if it matters?" Every noise becomes the noise of a taxi and real taxis come rushing past. At last one stops—she hears a step on the staircase—the bell goes through her like an electric shock.

He comes in and looks at her for a moment without speaking. "You are looking very beautiful!" Her eyes shine. She feels herself to be the incarnation of beauty. "It's for you," she stops herself from saying. She mustn't force things. He kisses her hand. She feels so happy and at peace. The clock has stopped.

"I oughtn't to have come," he says. "You said

I was grumpy and gloomy the other day; I am much worse now. I don't know what has come over me."

She looks at him anxiously and fingers his sleeve.

"Have you a headache?" (She *hopes* he is ill.)

"Can I do anything for you?"

"Nothing, thank you."

She is chilled, he is silent.

And then: "Do you remember Jameson, that archæologist in Abyssinia?" She has forgotten Jameson, but she hastily assents, trying to be nearer him by this link in their pasts. "I met him to-day."

Jameson has become the centre of the universe. She listens, to his voice really, but with the surface of her intelligence she comments, in order to be the wonderful listener he always praised.

Dinner is announced—Jameson is abandoned.

She wants this meal to be a Holy Communion between them.

He is happy now, talking, full of reminiscences which usually begin with "You remember" (she likes them to begin like that), though many of them deal with times before she was born or before she knew him—only she can't admit that he was born before she was or that there was a time when they didn't know one another.

He is telling her a story about the East, but his voice chloroforms her to what he is saying. "I want to consult you." She is alert now, vitally

interested. It is only on a very small point, but she is glad to have had her advice asked.

Suddenly: "You look tired," he says. "I am glad you are going to have a holiday." (A holiday!) "To-morrow at this time you will be in the train. Let me see, you ought just to have reached——"

He becomes a map and a time-table. She shudders. Why doesn't he say he is sorry she is going? How odd men are!

They go into the next room and she puts her head on his shoulder, while half absently he strokes her hair. He has never kissed her since she married, though he once took her face in his hands and said: "You make it so difficult for me," and, elated, she had wondered how to make it much more difficult still.

She wishes he would put his face near hers, and comfort her and cosset her like a child—just now she only wants tenderness, not passion.

"When are you going to Abyssinia?" she asks. He tells her.

"Do you wish I were coming with you?"

"No. It is no fit place for a woman."

"But if it were?"

"It would not be Abyssinia."

"Don't be so matter-of-fact." She could hit him.

"I told you I was no fit companion for anyone to-night."

"But I'm not anyone."

"Not even for you, then."

She knows that she is going to give him an opening to hurt her so she rushes back to Jameson. She is determined to be brilliant and she succeeds. She sees him laughing and thinking what wonderful company she is. As if she cared a damn! And it is getting later and later, the whole evening slipping away like this.

"Are you going to write to me?"

"Of course."

"Long, intimate, indiscreet letters?"

"You know what my letters are like. They never fulfil any of your requirements, do they?"

"I don't think I get as good as I give."

"But, then, you are a born letter-writer."

"Do you remember the first letter I ever wrote you?"

"Yes."

"It was ages ago, just before I was married."

"It doesn't seem such ages to me."

"Ah, but you haven't married."

The thought gives her courage and happiness. After all, he isn't married.

"I must be going," he says. "It has been a very happy evening." (Happy!)

"Bless you, my dear."

He looks into her eyes and he goes.

She undresses feverishly. How long will it take him to get home? She takes up the receiver. No reply. She waits an eternity. Five minutes. She forces herself to wait another five. Then she tries again.

"Is that you?"

"Yes."

"I have rung up to say 'Good-night.'"

"How nice of you!"

"I am very nice."

"I know."

Suddenly she feels at ease for the first time. Her voice gurgles and bubbles. She tells him little things that people said to her in shops. He laughs. Their bodily separation has brought them together again. Intimacy is enveloping them. She blesses the telephone.

"I have got my light out, and you?"

"I am not undressed."

"Shall I see you again?"

"What time does your train go?"

"At one."

"Perhaps we might go for a drive together in the morning?"

"Yes, do let's. Good-night, dearest; bless you."

Fancy her ringing off first! She is frightened of spoiling it.

"Bless you."

"Say 'dearest.' "

"Dearest." •

She is so happy, so radiantly happy, for after all there is to-morrow, and to-morrow is bound to be perfect.

"I won't wear my old coat and skirt to travel in," she murmurs to herself till, her consciousness merging into dreams, she falls asleep.

III

"THE WEB"

SHE drove into the little Westminster backwater in which he lived. Sure—as she had so often been sure before—that to-day she would be courageous and not sacrifice the hour to the moment or a lifetime to the hour. What was the good of trying not to hurt if the ultimate hurt she was bound to inflict increased in proportion to the small wounds she avoided? She had no blind eye to which to put her telescope. By experience she knew that every time she tried to pay off some of her indebtedness by a gesture of tenderness she was in reality increasing her liabilities.

To-day the little corner of Westminster that she had always loved seemed more even than usual to envelop her in their mutual intimacy. The evening air was shot with red gold and the tree like a giraffe, that she had often fondled with her eyes, beckoned to her with irresistible self-confidence.

"The last door on the right," she said to the taxi, and to herself, "I won't look up. I will do nothing misleading." She knew that he would be bending out of the window, his eyes drawing her into his house, his face lit up by the sight of her.

She rang the bell. "Perhaps he didn't hear the taxi," she thinks, and she looks up to see. He is watching her with a quiet, ecstatic look, while her silver cloak entangles bits of the sunset. The old housekeeper welcomes her lovingly. Here indeed is the wife she would have chosen for her beloved pampered young master.

He himself is standing at the top of the stairs. "Helana! At last!" She is in his little room—in the middle of his slum of books. Red gold dust in her eyes and a ridiculous irrelevant feeling of being at home in her heart.

"How long have you been away? Five whole, endless days empty of everything but my thoughts of you."

"How well you talk." His phrasing has cooled her.

His face changes. Cold, hard lines come out everywhere. "You always manage to spoil everything, don't you?"

Desperately she clutches at her opportunity. "I know I do always. It is dreadful. You don't know how I hate to rain for your picnic."

"It is so easy for you not to. You are fighting not me but yourself."

"I am not fighting anything—not even my own cowardice. Do you think I like making you unhappy? Do you think it amuses me? We just are

hopelessly unsuited to one another. Do you seriously think that you want a wife like me?"

"Marriage will modify you."

"Marriage might modify me if I married the right man. Marriage to you would bring out everything you hate."

"Helena, do you realise that I love you?"

As always before this real, undeniable, important, impossible fact she stops. To her it is a brick wall to be surmounted neither by argument—that being unconvincing—nor surrender—that being unattainable. She looks at him with wide, frightened eyes.

"Helena, you don't know what love means."

Again she snatches at her opportunity. "Of course I don't. If I did I might want to marry you."

"You love me, but you don't know it. You fight it, you won't admit it. You let me love you. You made me love you. What am I to think?"

"Think the worst of me and let me go."

"I can't. You are as much mine as if you were my wife."

She hates him for his assumptions and his certainties. How can she get away from him?

"Luke——"

"Yes."

Her voice is very low. "If you want me, I will give myself to you."

"I want much more than that—and much less—if you like."

She has keyed herself up to this supreme act of escape. If only he lets her do this her sense of honour will be satisfied and she will be free—with no more debts to haunt and entangle her.

How can she get him to accept?

"You talk about love," she says. "What a strange, restricted growth it is with you. You don't know what the real thing means, you who think passion is bad taste because you are not tempted, you to whom the physical side is a degrading extra." Her words are deliberate and clipped like a box hedge. She is ashamed—bitterly ashamed—but what else can she do?

"Helena," his voice is rough, "be careful what you say. Don't you think I want you, that I desire you—if that is the sort of language you like?"

He has gripped her two arms. She bites her lip and, shutting her eyes, waits. Suddenly he releases her and turns away. She can hear his breath coming in quick, uneven stabs.

"And yet you refuse me when I offer myself to you?"

She says it very slowly in a low, caressing voice. In her heart she knows that his valuation is the same as hers—only to him her gift would mean disillusion and to her freedom.

"I don't accept a debased currency." His voice is like ice, and then passionately, "I hate you when you talk like that."

"You don't think it like a lady?"

She remembers a hundred instances of his insolent, moral magnificence. "You want me to sign your name, to sit at the head of your table, to dazzle your friends, to eclipse your sisters-in-law, to be a mother to your children."

She is working herself up.

"Certainly, and I want you to be my wife, my beloved—my sweetheart."

His voice has suddenly melted, the glint has given way to a glow. She feels battered by his logic and his love and the reality of what he is saying.

"Luke, do you want me to marry you whether I want to or not?"

"Yes. I mean to marry you."

At dinner they talk of other things. There is a cushion at the back of her chair and flowers by her plate and little things that she likes to eat.

She doesn't say much. Her head aches.

After dinner he makes her put her feet up and curl into his sofa like a long stretched cat.

Very gently, very tenderly he puts his cool hand on her forehead. He has always had that curiously healing touch. He doesn't worry her or fuss her. He never mentions a dangerous topic. Simply she

has a feeling of relaxation as if she were in a warm bath. A drowsy feeling of comfort comes over her. He talks to her without waiting for or expecting an answer.

Daylight seems to have faded before their eyes, leaving a bright blue night with very yellow lights shining out of windows and lamps. He has lit a wood fire, which warms her eyes and gives a flickering unreality to the room.

"After all," she defends herself to herself, "no one can make a scene by firelight."

He is stroking the creamy velvet of her dress and, bending down with the ceremoniousness those flowers demand, he smells the gardenias at her waist while she notices that their white suede petals are shrivelling into yellow vellum.

The pearls at her neck have allowed little patches of the fire to settle on them, and undoing their clasp he lets them trickle through his fingers like sand. Kissing her hand he gets to the heart of that faint scent of hers that seems like the memory or the echo of something forgotten.

She knows how he loves these things, the ever old and the ever new delight that they are to him. She tries to fight the anchored sense that is coming over her with a question about some book. His opinion on that, and indeed almost all subjects, is valueless to her. It doesn't even interest her. But

to-night she asks only to be irritated, for some word of his to let loose the things she has come to say. He doesn't want to talk about a topic, but he reads her a little poem, and a certain lilt in the meaningless words lulls her into an even greater quiescence.

"I wonder if you yourself realise the magic of your presence in this house," he says.

But it is not a question, and after saying it he is silent.

It is ridiculous that she should like his talking like that, and she likes it too when later he gives her a wonderful description of what he would feel like were she to fall asleep on his sofa. Her eyelids keep closing as if he were mesmerising her, she is clutching at consciousness like a drowning woman, but the water is very warm.

Suddenly something inside her capsizes.

"Luke, do you really want to marry me?"

"I want your headache to go. We won't discuss anything else."

The evening drifts into a happy little creek of understanding. She has a feeling of blue air and diamond decked water. She knows it is ridiculous, the effects of a headache on her part and a little calculated generosity on his.

She may not be taken in but she is taken.

At last she gets up to go.

"Remember, I am waiting for you to give me your headache."

"And nothing else?" She could hit herself for saying it.

"That is all I am asking for to-night."

She drives away, forcing a retrospect of her evening into her soul like a hot iron. Always it is like that. She gives way to the immediate, a *désire* to make him happy or to be happy, an indulging in the indulgence of being wanted. She likes to be comforting and perhaps even—horrible thought—comfortable. And always she gets nearer the middle of the web. "To-night after all I had a headache, but to-morrow I will face the facts and tell the truth and tear the whole false fabric to bits——"

To-morrow!

They're all ordinary
B E +

IV

AN ORDINARY MAN

HE was driving her home in a taxi, and in emphasis of something she was saying she pressed his knee with her hand. With a jerk he shrank back into his corner, and revealed to her for the first time the intensity of his passion for her. After that she avoided seeing him alone; but the very fact that they both knew made the atmosphere more explosive. The air was unbreathable with the impending thunderstorm.

To-day it had broken, and she was looking at him with big, distressed eyes, feeling somehow that it was indecent for her to be seeing a naked soul. His whole face and voice had changed. Every now and then he shut his eyes as if to blot out her physical presence. His mouth seemed a different shape, and his hot, dry lips had a limp, formless look as if he had no control over them.

The thought struck her that they looked waterproof, but she put the ribald suggestion from her, shocked by her own levity.

"You are so unlike other women," he said. She accepted it with a sigh, wondering if anyone would ever say to her: "You are all the women who have

ever lived, and yourself." What fun to be Helen and Cleopatra and Madame de Genlis and Jane Welsh Carlyle! Her mind was wandering.

"You see, I have never met anyone at all like you," he went on, while she added Ninon de l'Enclos and Jane Austen to her list. "I didn't know I could want to kiss anyone more than anything in the world and then not do it out of love."

This brought back her attention. Always she had been loved by sensual men reverently; once only by an intellectual passionately. Both were flattering, the first more convenient, the second more satisfactory.

"I wonder if you know what I mean?"

"I think I do," she said very gently, as one who had strained her subtlety to meet the peculiarities of the situation.

"I believe you would find it difficult to forgive me if I kissed you," he went on, "you are so odd. I believe you would really be angry."

"Not angry—sad," she said, smiling a little cynically at this mobilisation of his chivalry.

"Good God! don't you know I would rather die than make you that?"

He knelt down and put his head in her lap. "I wish I could do things for you every day and all day, for ever."

She seemed to meet him everywhere, and always

the knowledge that he was in the room made her prettier. There is nothing so beautifying as being loved. It was delightful to feel that, whomever he was talking to and whomever he was looking at, his ears and eyes were really running away towards her.

He never could make up his mind whether to go up to her or not. He hated to have to snatch little moments of her time away from other people—people to whom she was merely a woman, or a friend, or even an acquaintance—and yet he could not keep away. He had to come up to see whether her face was *just* the same as he remembered it and to hear the gurgle in her voice like the pouring of water when the jug is nearly full.

“Poor man, he is terribly in love with you.”

“Do you *think* so?” she answered with arched eyebrows. “He is always very sweet to me and he is wonderfully unselfish, and then, poor man”—her voice was infinitely tender—“he is suffering from shell-shock.”

She liked him best when he hurried her out of draughts, wrapped rugs round her legs, pulled up the collars of her coats and nearly strangled her with her furs. The little touch of clumsiness in his tenderness always melted her. . . .

“All the afternoon while I played cards at my club I smelt my hands, for it seemed to me that a

little whiff of your scent had clung to them." . . .

His letters were curiously better than she expected them to be—always. And she liked his graceful hand-writing and the way he wrote her name.

There was a woman—a girl—who was in love with him and of whom he saw a great deal. She always praised her and sometimes wondered.

The doctor sent him to the country; and twice every day he wrote to her from his chaise-longue, and twice every day she wrote to him in order that no post should be a disappointment. She never could resist illness. He went to stay with the girl and mentioned her very little in his letters. Also he wrote about "your great superiority; when we are together I always feel that I am mixing dross with gold." Little twinges of anxiety went through her.

"What a contemptible creature I am!" she thought.

"After all, I didn't want his love."

He came to stay with her, and his great talent came into play, his talent for country-house life. He did everything better than anyone else; but just now under the doctor's orders he was forbidden exercise. Every morning she went into his room, and he very courteously refused every suggestion she made for his comfort or his happiness. Sometimes she played golf before breakfast so that she

should be back in time for him, should he want her. Always she tried to conceal the sacrifices she was making. "I would be so grateful if you would come with me in the motor . . ." Or, if he was installed in the garden, "May I come and sit here for a few minutes?"

There were days when nothing was right. He contradicted everything she said, and asked her if she were trying to irritate him. Sometimes at night in bed she cried with exhaustion.

Her aunt loved him. Such a very nice young man. So sweet to old people. So touchingly devoted to his mother. Why, he never seemed to think of himself at all. His manners were perfect. He was charming to everyone. He knew something about everything. He rarely seemed to be out of his depth, but then he could swim a little. She smiled at his beautiful steering through the heavy traffic of facts. His public attitude towards her was perfect. Tender, deferential, anxiously considerate, he always seemed to be there to push her chair in or to pull it out; and when he picked up her handkerchief or her glove, he gave it her with a peculiar little intimate look that everyone noticed. She knew that people said: "His care of her is really very touching. She is rather a selfish woman." She went on bearing it all, deaf to his delicate, ingenious insults.

"I suppose," she said to herself, "that I love him now that I know the very bottom of his shallows." The thought humiliated her, but she faced it with the rest.

She could register the arrival of a third person by the change in his voice and his expression. The caressing note and the caressing look that once belonged to her were now exploited on her. He still lifted her feet on to sofas and tucked a shawl round her—unless they happened to be alone. She wondered if he smiled to see her in a trap, and sometimes she wondered why he wanted to keep her there.

It appeared that the girl was engaged to someone else. Perhaps they were keeping up appearances. *She* was keeping up appearances for them. And he had once loved her!

At last one day he went. He said good-bye very tenderly, though there was only a porter to see them. He looked, she thought, a little guilty.

Out of the window of the train he took her hand and kissed it.

"Still the same old scent. I have forgotten what it was called."

"*Gage d' amour*," she murmured, ridiculously conscious that a mist of tears was clouding her eyes.

* * * * *

"I want you to be the first to know . . ."

So it had come at last, the long-expected letter. She looked quickly down the page for "I want you to love Effie"; and there sure enough it was.

She laughed a little, and sent them a magnificently impersonal present with an invitation to lunch.

"You are a wonderful psychologist," said the playwright. "I have never known you wrong."

"Haven't you?" she smiled, bantering him with the tone of her voice. And then, seriously: "I was once completely taken in by someone."

"He must have been a very remarkable person."

"No," she said, meditatively, "he wasn't. He was—yes—he was just an ordinary man."

V

THE GESTURE

THEY were ridiculously happy. Smiles trickled about her mouth irresponsibly, irrepressibly, while her voice gurgled and bubbled. The fire was hot and glowing, staining bits of the wall and making ruddy puddles among the silver paraphernalia of tea things. Their faces too, were dyed red and seemed unreal, part of the fantastic delightfulness of this hour. The windows framed bright blue plaques of evening and a vase of poinsettias looked like a wonderful bunch of scarlet octopuses. She luxuriated in every detail of her happiness, taking a disproportionate pleasure in a bunch of lilies of the valley that lay on her lap and seemed to throw a web of fragrance over the room.

It didn't matter what either of them said. Everything was equally important and equally irrelevant. Sometimes she would have a little break of wit and he would applaud as if it were a turn. For a moment they would play the game of not being intimate in order to plunge ecstatically back again. Then:

"I must be back at half past seven," he said.
That sobered her.

"Have you ever thought of the rubato of time," she asked. "That though a clock is a metronome, no two hours are ever the same length?"

"Yes," he said. "The shortest are eternal."

They talked of things so banal that they would have disgraced a *débutante* at a dinner party and of things of so great a magnitude that it seemed ridiculous to mention them at all. And underneath it all ran the strong, swift current of their intimacy.

"We might never have met," he said. "It was quite, quite an accident."

"Yes," she smiled. "You restored my confidence in turnings."

"In turnings?"

"When I was a child, I thought that round every corner something wonderful was waiting. And then for years the same sort of people seemed to recur like decimals, just a lot of different editions of the same thing. And then I met you."

"And I was prejudiced to the verge of rudeness. I hardly listened to what you said."

"Yes, and after making up your mind to hate me you had to climb back on to the fence and dangle your legs on the other side."

"But be fair. When I did come over to you, I capitulated entirely. I didn't keep one little defense in reserve. Whereas you, who have made a study of giving yourself away, always keep what you

want to keep inviolate. You with your warm invulnerability!"

"Ah, how much I keep back from you!" she teased him and suddenly she caught sight of her watch.

Half past seven.

He saw her and asked how late it was. By the time they had got a taxi it was a quarter to eight. She was going in a diametrically opposite direction to his but she couldn't resist taking him part of the way—a very big part of the way—till finally she dropped him like a hot potato, it was easier like that, and spurring on her taxi, she rushed to the other side of London.

She was calling for a very dear friend at his office and she was at least three quarters of an hour late. Would he be hurt or offended, or both? Would she have to spend the whole evening soothing and smoothing his ruffled feelings, till she ended, as she always did in those circumstances, by saying more than she had meant to, by fanning flames she wanted to keep low and then making desperate efforts to retrieve her indiscretion?

"I will have a nice evening," she thought, as she saw herself see-sawing from one extreme to the other. And then she would have to make up her mind whether or not to lie about what had kept her—she who loathed lying. And if she didn't, she

would be inflicting extra pain and opening up interminable vistas of questionings and justifications and extenuations—and—so it seemed to her—vulgarisations.

She drove up to the office and rang the bell. No answer. Could it be that he had lost patience and left? She rang again. So even he had come to the end of his forbearance. She thought she could see a light. Better telephone in case he hadn't heard. She crossed the road in search of a telephone and ran straight into him.

She rushed into a stream of blame and accusation.

"So you couldn't even wait for me?"

"My dear," he said, "this is divine of you. It is like you to have given me this lovely surprise."

Bewildered, she looked at him—surely this was rather crude irony?

"What surprise?"

"Why to have come so gloriously unexpectedly early. You sometimes hurt me and make me angry, but you always make up for it by some little gesture of a tenderness, some unhopd for gift."

"What time is it?" she asked, dazed.

"Just half past seven."

"But, then it must have been half past six."

"What must have been half past six?"

"An hour ago," she answered inanely.

But he hardly listened.

"Thank you, my darling," he said, kissing her hand.

She smiled.

"I did have rather a rush," she said.

VI

CYCLAMEN

I DO love that chintz," he said. Her eyes veiled a discreet question as they turned from the faded pink squiggles to his face.

He smiled. "I said I loved it—not that I thought it beautiful. The pattern is packed with memories for me." He was silent and she said nothing, knowing that no definite enquiry would elicit as much as her indefinite, all-pervading sympathy. But being infinitely curious, she tried a confidence as the first step to a counter-confidence.

"So many things," she said "are emotion-carriers—unexpected, absurd things."

* * * * *

Then "You are keeping me waiting," he said.

"Once upon a time there was a man—or rather just before the war I knew a man—I don't know how to begin. I wasn't in love with him. He wasn't in love with me, but I was a revelation to him—a revelation of himself. People said I had invented him. It wasn't quite true, but I emphasized what was uncharacteristic in him and forced my estimate on to him, when he was with me—he was

nearly always with me. Away from me he relapsed into his own personality, but I didn't know it. I don't know how to describe him to you. He was often considered almost half-witted. His mind was like a searchlight that overlooked cathedrals, but occasionally lit up some small forgotten chapel. You never knew where it would dive to, what irrelevant objects it would collect, how many continents would go undiscovered. He was a delightful companion. He never seemed to look for anything, but some sixth sense was always finding things. No one else saw them at all, and I suppose I magnified them.

"Then the war broke out. I was in the North of Scotland when he was reported wounded and missing. The thoughts I thought of him by day controlled by my strength of will and by the daylight, broke loose at night, running riot through my defenseless head. They didn't become dreams, but seemed parts of an incoherent *mêlée* of impressions and memories. And always I was in quest of something fixed, some certain intonation of his voice, some definite expression in his eyes, something stable among my ever-wandering images of him. And always it eluded me. Have you noticed how, when you are anxious about someone, it is the little things that got on your nerves that constitute themselves into claims?

"I didn't remember the way he wrapped rugs

'round me; the wide open delighted look his eyes had when he said, 'I never thought of that.' I remembered a little bow-tie that looked as if it were made of sponge bag and the fact that he used the word 'cheery.' Why had those unimportant details maddened me so, and why did they now assert themselves so poignantly? What contract would I not have signed with the devil for a sight of that bow-tie—what song or triumph would not have been contained in the sound of that word!

"As you know, the first thing that everyone does in the country is to go to the nearest town. In Scotland the shops are always the same: woollen scarves and tweeds, kodaks and rheumatic sponges, cairngorm dirks and amethyst thistles, scones and Edinburgh rock with the name of the village substituted for Edinburgh.

"I went in to a chemist's and after rejecting some lozenges and some films, a loofah and a bottle of formamint, I fell to a box of cyclamen face cream. It promised to do all sorts of things for my complexion, but I loved it for itself alone and without any vulgar hope of personal advantage. It had the curiously unsickly smell of a woodland flower after a day's rain and it soothed my temples where competitive rhythms of pain were giving a ragtime performance on my exposed nerves.

* * * * *

"Two days later I heard that he had been taken prisoner by the Germans, and retaken by the English. A month later he was safe in London and his mother asked me to go and see him.

"It was October, 1914, and everyone was famished for details of everything. My aunt is not the most tactful of women, but fortunately she didn't know that it was a case for tact, and she did most frightfully want to know what the great war was like. So she suggested coming with me, and we sallied forth together. I remember wearing some pink lilies and verbenas and soothing myself by looking at them. I felt most frightfully sick and the beating of my heart seemed a form of corporal punishment.

"We went into the room where he was sitting (he had been badly wounded in the leg) and I said: 'I am so glad'; and my aunt said: 'It is splendid that you are safe. We want to hear all about it.'

"His face was very pinched, I thought, and he had a haunted look in his eyes as if he had seen things he couldn't get rid of even by telling them.

"But he answered a lot of questions that I couldn't save him from. And all the time I felt like a violin that is asked to play in tune on a platform without having been given the note. It wasn't that we had anything special to say. One moment in the green room would have put us right, but that moment had been denied us. My aunt seemed to

become gradually aware of the growing constraint and abruptly she took her leave with:

“ ‘You two will have things to say to one another, which did not make them any easier to say. However, the dilemma did not last long, as one eager enquirer after the war succeeded another and, keeping back the tears which were massing behind my eyes, I surrendered myself to the humour of the situation. I wondered how everything could go wrong so chromatically in such half-tones of disappointment. Laughing, joking, keeping my gnawing sense of frustration at bay, I played up while he watched me with bewildered miserable eyes. ‘She doesn’t care,’ I saw him think, and I realised not for the first time that to men if you laugh you are heartless and if you cry you are hysterical, where as the juste milieu stamps you for ever as a woman without feeling.

“ ‘You fool, you silly fool,’ I thought to myself, and to him I said, ‘You will come and see me soon?’ In the taxi hot, painful tears forced themselves revengefully through my eyes, angry at having been kept back so long.

“He came to see me, jerky and ill at ease. To find words for what he had to say was like trying to find overcoats for Kitchener’s army. We were oppressed by so many things that could only have

been communicated by wireless and the current had been broken by that awful meeting. I realised with the supersensitiveness of my tense nerves that his staccato sentences were the end of everything. We made a lot of plans, but I think that we both knew that most of them would remain—hardly even engagements. When he was going I said, 'I am so happy that you are back safe.' I had, I realised, become a friendly conventional phrase, an eternity away from the throbbing, vibrant 'I am glad' of a few days before. All my anguish and all my joy had died.

"A year later I walked into a room full of people, feeling that light-heartedness which, though one never remembers it afterwards, is more like ecstasy than any of our heavier emotions; and as I passed a woman she pulled out her handkerchief. Waves of cyclamen seemed breaking over my head, and I fainted dead away . . ."

His eyes were twinkling and he put his hand on hers.

"I love that chintz," he said. "We had it in our schoolroom; it reminds me of buttered toast and watercress and eggs for tea."

VII

THE DREAM

THANK you for all you've done for me."

"But I haven't done anything."

"For being yourself, for being here. I feel as if all my tautness had relaxed, as if my ridiculous, feverish complexities had evaporated in your cool, luminous serenity. Being with you is like bathing naked in a still pool at dawn."

She smiled at the tumbling eagerness of his phrases.

"How beautifully you put it," she said. "How worth while you make my passive sedentary life feel."

He thought of her wonderful sameness, the sameness of certainty, not of monotony.

The filmy mysterious greyness of her clothes, her neck encircled with tulle in summer and chinchilla in winter, and pearls dripping out below. The insolent arch of her instep, the nervous ripples that went through her long, white, transparent fingers. Her hair like some banked-up mass of deepening shadows, piled above the wasted whiteness of her face; her eyes sheets of colour-drained grey water mirroring the gathering clouds; her quizzical, sardonic mouth

with its lovely square corners, laughing at the romantic in her and having the last word.

She was seated on a grey seat, and branching out on either side of it were irises of every tinge: snow-white and red-purple, blue-violet and grey-mauve, erect and self-sufficient, aloof and infinitely beautiful. She was wearing a Quaker-plain grey lawn dress and holding her grey gardening gloves on her lap. In spite of his outburst and her acceptance of it, she seemed to him remote and distant beyond the power of words. "What are you thinking about," she asked.

"I suppose I was thinking about you—only I never get any further forward or any deeper down."

"What do you want to know?"

"The sphinx's secret."

"Are you sure she has one?"

"Quite sure."

She smiled lazily. "What part of her secret do you want to know?"

"I want to know how you have reached security; how you have found your island; how you are able to be so deliberate, so calm, so rooted and yet so alive. Whether no ultimate loneliness ever tugs at you; what battle you have had to win to be so complete in your victory."

"I don't know," she said. "Life to me has ceased to be a fever, a rush, a noise, a kaleidoscope. I seem

to have become a plant, a very happy plant with some sort of a flower out all the year 'round."

"Yes," he sighed. "You are always in flower. I think of you as an iris or a clematis or a magnolia or a delphinium with a touch of all the lilies in the world, but not quite like any special one."

But her thoughts were far away from him. She thought of her husband who had kissed her as if she were a crucifix and treated her always as some infinitely fragile sacred thing, to be broken by a breath. She thought of the men who had loved her since his death—if the reverent devotion she had inspired could be called love—of how they, too, had approached her on tip-toe as if her preciousness made her almost into an invalid. She remembered how people said they were frightened of her. She was a "great lady," of a sort that had been suppressed by progress and machinery and competition and she wondered what it would be like to be loved passionately with an animal passion. In her bodily loneliness she cried out for roughness, for a primitive sensual disregard of her feelings. She wanted to be "a" woman to "a" man; to be mastered and perhaps crushed. She imagined herself being swept off her feet into some fleeting monstrous adventure. She wanted to see it in all its warm-coloured squalor. The great, big hectoring man ordering dinner in the bleak station hotel forcing her to eat and drink and

then ordering her up to her bedroom to undress. She could see the bedroom. A great scarlet silk shade to the electric light, a dark red eiderdown, a big brass bed and huge gilt mirrors—the strange excrescences of pattern on the white quilt, the mustard roses on the wallpaper. She saw herself undressing, a shiver of apprehension going through her and then she heard heavy footsteps in the passage, the bright end of a cigar preceded him into the room, followed by his heavy breathing——

“Ursula!”

She opened her eyes. There were irises all 'round her and the pale sun was everywhere.

“Ursula, you must know how much I love you. Will you marry me?”

His beautifully cut sensitive profile was bent over her two hands. He kissed them.

She shivered.

“My darling, I am worrying you; I am a brute, a rough, monstrous, blundering fool. I won't do it again. I swear I won't. Can you forgive me?”

“I wonder,” she said bitterly as she tore her hands away.

VIII

THE FAREWELL

SHE opened the door of his office in the tentative way that was her substitute for a knock. She hated a sharp rap and an equally sharp "Come in," but she liked the little preliminary peep with which she took in the scene before she became a part of it. Also she liked the slow, expanding "You," with which he greeted her when he was alone. However hurt or angry he was with her, an automatic reaction of gladness at the sight of her appeared in his eyes before he could control his expression into a suitably distant coldness. To-day was the morrow of a reconciliation that had tired them both out and even then had not been quite complete. He always had a fundamentally sore feeling that she could do without him and he paid for the fact that she was a stimulant by the fact that she was also an irritant. She vitalized and accelerated him quite extraordinarily and yet she was in many ways almost intolerably disintegrating. He held her responsible both for his best work and his worst fits of idleness. She was tender and inconsiderate, vain and intellectually honest, never deceiving herself, staggeringly truthful, straight with-

out being frank, with irritating patches of what he called caution and she called reticence. She was cruel and wounding and hurt and offended by little things, and divinely magnanimous on big occasions. To the really unforgivable she always responded with triumphant unpettiness; if she made mountains out of molehills, she also made molehills out of mountains. The huge insults he had sometimes thrown at her she accepted or rejected on their merits. They did not seem to touch her vanity because they had gone beyond it. And everything about her mattered and did not matter because he loved her.

She was sitting at his table, fingering his papers and reading bits of them upside down. In all the many scenes she had had with him at that office she always seemed to have read things upside down, as if this unaccustomed effort soothed her nerves. He was sitting on the table with his hands in his pockets and his eyes on the floor.

"I have come to say good-bye."

"Yes," he said.

"For six whole months."

"Yes."

"Which is a very long time."

"Yesterday you said that it was a very short time."

"Yes, but to-day is the eve of to-morrow and to-morrow I go."

There was a pause. He minded much more than she did. The six months would be crowded for her with vivid experiences worked out with all her inexhaustible vitality and curiosity. To him they would be void, empty with the emptiness of her absence. Why then did *she* ask for a verbal protestation from *him*?

It was ridiculous, it was intolerable. He said nothing, resisting the effect of her idle hand that lay limp and expectant on the table. He didn't even look at her but remained silently intrenched behind his resolute bitterness.

For weeks she could do without him, not needing him or wanting him, while his heart gave a great thump each time the telephone bell rang and his feverish fingers fumbled through every pile of letters, looking in vain for one from her. And then she would come and think she could buy back his faith with a few moments of her time, laughing at his reproaches and telling him not to make love a problem of arithmetic.

And always, of course, he was at the mercy of the sight and the sound of her.

"Do you think I don't want to believe? Of course I do, but for weeks now you haven't needed

me and you can't buy back my faith with a few moments."

"My dear," she said, "don't make us both wretched with your absurd arithmetic weighing moments against hours, hours against days, days against weeks. It is a ridiculous way of calculating."

"I only long to be convinced." There was an infinite weariness in his voice.

She took his hand and laid it by her face and murmured caressing, reassuring words while he struggled with bitter memories and still he was only half-soothed.

"You are coming to tea with me," she said.

"Perhaps it is better I shouldn't."

"Don't you want to?"

"I don't know."

"You will be sorry to-morrow if you don't."

"I wonder."

"Will you come if I want you to?"

"Of course."

Her hand crept to his coat and gave it a little tug.

"Do be nice to me my last day."

"I don't know how to," he said, and then reluctantly and firmly he took her face in his hands and kissed her with a sort of relentless gentleness. After that another silence fell between them, broken at last by a rush of conversation about nothing, or rather about everything but themselves. He asked

her what time her train left; what she meant to read on the journey; whether she believed in Mother-sill. She asked him about his plans and prospects and the people he meant to see. They wanted to talk about one another, but to have a respite from the pitfalls of their personal relationship.

Feeling a little cowardly and very wise, they put infinite zest into their questions and answers, warding off with masterly skill the possible entry of reality into the conversation.

And then, "I must see Miss Green," she said. Miss Green was his secretary.

"Good-bye, Miss Green; I am going away tomorrow for months."

"I had no idea of that."

Miss Green, the typewriter, the books, the files—all were so familiar, so precise and intimate to her. She held Miss Green's hand.

"I shan't disturb you any longer," she said, and her voice sounded strange and choked unexpectedly. The blur in front of her eyes condensed into hot lumpy drops. "I mustn't disgrace myself," she thought, but her final good-bye was a broken affair.

As he saw her downstairs, every bit of emotion fell from her, her eyes were dry, her voice was cool and she finished her sentences. For all this she was sorry.

"Do you know," she said, "I nearly cried when I said good-bye to Miss Green."

"I didn't know you were so fond of Miss Green."

She stroked his hand a little and looking up at him with a smile that obliterated all bitterness:

"Neither did I," she said, as she drove off.

IX

TOUT COMPRENDRE

ADRIAN ROSE was thirty and it was difficult to imagine that he had ever known any other age. It was impossible to associate him with the teens, those glorious, gawky years of shy clumsy ecstasies and passionate floundering plunges into the unknown, or with the immature glistening twenties when life is fizzing and bubbling and bursting and adventure is chary of turning into experience. No, thirty he had been born and however long he lived the ten years between thirty and forty were those ordained for him by fate. When you said he was young you would always be referring to a fact rather than to a quality, and it was in this sense that he liked the word used. He had a horror of the unfledged.

Adrian Rose was perfectly happy—or perhaps I should say perfectly satisfied with life. He was a second son—he preferred to be a second son—with all the advantages of a country house to fall back on and none of the disadvantages of having to live there, go to church on Sundays, study agriculture and give garden parties.

Also by saying "My brother is rather a Philistine

you know," he could deftly hint at a background of breeding.

Having been left money by an aunt, he was able to live in great comfort a life of leisure, lazy without being idle, and occupied without being busy. He was interested in literature, in art, in music and in people, boasting an ignorance of politics and an indifference to science. Praised as a most flattering listener he was glad that the chatter of his neighbour invariably gave him time to frame a piquant contribution to the conversation. He took an indefatigable interest in what he was going to say next. A man who is available for lunch, has no wife, is interested in everything and talks well, is socially invaluable. If Adrian was never the first person to be asked to a meal, and, let us admit it, very frequently the last, he was nevertheless always the right man in the right place and if not the life and soul, at any rate the cement of a party.

And then one day an enthusiastic young lady exclaimed, "You express yourself so beautifully, Mr. Rose. Why don't you write a book?" A book? The magic word wrought havoc in his mind. Why not, indeed? Those sensitive fastidious aperçues would make a charming little volume. Not on a very big scale of course, but perfect in its way, with a distinct flavour of its own. Gathering his impressions together, he took his pen in his hand

while he saw visions of reviews beginning, "A place will be found on the shelves of every book lover for . . ."

"From A Pergola" appeared. On the paper wrapper the publisher gave a kindly hint to reviewers. "These sketches have the perfection of exquisite bric-à-brac. There is nothing Anglo-Saxon in Mr. Rose's sensitive talent, rather he reminds us of our friends across the Channel." Later quotations ("A pleasant little volume"—The *Times* Literary Supplement; "A masterpiece in miniature"—Nottingham *Gazette*) were inserted and if some of them came from Books in Brief, who could tell that? A long praising notice appeared in an intellectual weekly; a great leader of fashion pronounced "On Greetings" unapproachable in its genre. "From A Pergola" became a topic of conversation and went into three editions.

"Does anyone really think it good?" an independent woman whispered to the editor of the *Athenæum*. "It seems to me like one of those shops of which one sees ten in each street with some lingerie, a blouse, a jumper and a hat in the window."

Mr. Adrian Rose was conscious of the humming buzz of whispers that followed an announcement of his name. Not to have heard of him simply showed that you were out of things. It cast no reflection on him. And his literary success made him work again

at his charcoals. They were very powerful and black and white, overemphasising the obviously relevant until it fell out of place. He was a man of few strokes and many words.

And then, bringing disorder into his perfectly arranged life, dismay into his beautifully tidied mind, uninvited, unwanted, bewildering and infinitely upsetting, came love. Passion is no respecter of persons. She hardly seems to select her victims. How many a would-be Juliet waits in vain for those consuming fires her heart is longing for, while they blaze in the reluctant hearts of Mr. Adrian Roses, who only ask to be left in peace, far from the ridiculous and, thank God, equally far from the sublime. Adrian believed in light, iridescent emotions. The *amitié amoureuse* was always his objective—a glove, a fan, a camelia—these were to him the symbols of love. He imagined himself behaving with infinite delicacy in rather difficult situations. Hiding a bleeding heart beneath a gallant smile he withdrew in favour of his rival, or, sacrificing his happiness for hers, he reconciled his beloved with her husband. Never by any chance was he left with a woman on his hands—but always he left behind him a little aching void which nothing else could fill. These day dreams occupied his mind so pleasantly that he hardly sought to carry them into effect. He waited confidently for Providence to cast him

for the rôle he had chosen for himself. And as so frequently happens, Providence played him false.

Amber Vane, who had lost her parents as a baby, had been brought up by an aunt in an old grey house that seemed to have become white and transparent with age. Surrounded by a water-lily laden moat you caught two tantalising glimpses of it from the road, and each time you believed that you had seen some mirage, a gleaming apparition, the ghost of a house.

Millet Court, protected by the monosyllables of its yokels and the maze of lanes by which it was surrounded, remained deliciously inviolate in spite of repeated efforts to pierce its privacy by lovers of architecture or adventure. Miss Millet did not believe in God and ignored the very existence of her neighbours. She spoke French and Italian, she played the harp, she read indefatigably. The village accepted her iron rule and her home brewed medicines as they accepted the seasons. She belonged as intimately to them as the soil they tilled and yet in a sense she was awe-inspiring, an undoubted ambassadress of fate. Two passions she had, gardening and Amber. Flowers grew for her where they had never grown before—by her love they pushed through an unfriendly soil gallantly defeating a hostile climate. Miss Millet seemed to have made some unholy compact with nature.

But greater even than her passion for her flowers was her passion for her niece. Not only had she watched Amber grow but she had been able to share with her the store of knowledge and experience that had accumulated in her memory and her very real love of the highways and the byways of literature. Time had been when Miss Millet had explored the highways and byways of many worlds and her choice of solitude had not been a retreat but a conquest. She had not run away from life, she had in a way run through it or at least through the forms and phases of it that surrounded her. With Amber left to her she retired to Millet Court and from that day forward none of her friends crossed the threshold. "It is a hard thing," she wrote, "to cut out friendship, but the form of existence I have chosen would die were I not to perform the operation."

Amber was brought up without companions or masters or mistresses. But she was constantly in contact with the courage, the honesty, the dry wit, the wide learning, the warm understanding of Miss Millet. The hermit had not ceased to be a woman of the world, she had added another world to the kingdoms of her experience. Her niece, brought up in close touch with nature, learned the facts of life early and simply. A cultivated artificial ignorance was not used to produce the bloom of innocence. She grew in sun and shower and bloomed in beauti-

ful unself-consciousness, and then suddenly when she was eighteen her aunt died and she was plunged into the life she had heard of and read of and never seen.

* * * * *

"May I introduce you to my cousin—Miss Vane? Mr. Rose—Mr. Adrian Rose." She knew her cousin well enough to know that the Christian name added so ostentatiously was a certificate of fame. But "From A Pergola" had not reached Millet Court and the "Adrian" only left her consciously ignorant. "My cousin," added Lady Blair, "has been brought up entirely in the country in the most divine old house that now belongs to her. She has come to London to explore the world."

He looked at her. She was smiling a little and it struck him that she knew more than Lady Blair would ever know.

"You seem, if I may say so," he said, "to be starting your adventure very calmly. But you are quite right, the people who have train fever spend much too much time in stations."

He always tried to remember afterwards exactly what he had thought of her that day. But his first impression had got inextricably entangled with other later ones and he could never get it free.

He knew when he was with her that she was tall and slim and white, with pale coral lips and a cloudy

background of hair. The whole of her seemed pencilled in, a delicate faint unfussy outline. But when he left her he could never conjure her up in detail, for her eyes which should have provided a clue, a vivid mark in his memory, lamentably failed to do either. It was difficult to say why they were unlike other eyes in their deep unbroken grey on a blue-white ground, but somehow they seemed not to reveal but to conceal her soul, like some heavy curtain drawn across her individuality. Sometimes he felt that he had caught a glimpse of something—that the curtain had been drawn aside for a second—but always it fell back into place before he could make sure.

When he had been with her he emerged renewed, vital, vivid, faith aflame and doubt in ashes. If there was a damp dark note somewhere deep down within him, she convinced him that it was only a necessary place in which to grow the lilies of the valley of his fancy—that fragile sort with transparent primrose leaves. And when he was with her his conversation glowed and glittered, his gift of expression becoming almost tropical. It was as if her company were some wonderful chemical that gave a new brightness to all his colours.

But after he had left her he could never remember what she had said.

Gradually she obsessed him and he became a man

of one idea, a thousand hoping doubts and a thousand doubting hopes—in fact a man in love.

When he was with her now he stammered. He was miserable, angry, impotent. It was his first contact with life, and he didn't know that a stammer is the divine eloquence of love.

But she did. She had been born knowing everything, and she had not yet had time to forget it all. She was only nineteen.

One day they were walking through a bluebell wood, waves of unbelievable blue breaking all round them, the sky playing peep-bo with the trees. "I must speak," he said to himself unhappily, while he realised that he was physically incapable of bringing out the most commonplace phrase. He wondered how people forced the words they wanted out of their mouths. He thought it must be a marvellous gift.

She was dressed in pale lavender, a lavender parasol above her head, the sun catching in her hair. Her face was in blue shadow and she seemed infinitely remote.

He thought what a ridiculously unsuitable name "Amber" was. . . .

He decided to speak when he saw the next orchis.

He thought of a woman he had once imagined himself in love with. She had had red hair and green eyes—flames and emeralds he had called them

then—that had been when he was very young and red hair had seemed infinitely wicked and alluring and adventurous. . . .

He saw an orchis and hastily averted his eyes.

He thought of a rocking horse he had had as a child, dappled grey with a grey yellow tail and a scarlet saddle. . . .

Another orchis. He looked at her imploringly.

“What are you thinking about?” she responded to his appeal.

“Rocking horses,” he said. “Will you marry me?” And then desperately, “I know that’s not the way to put it,” and then convulsively, “I love you.”

His hands were behind his back and he did not know how to get hold of them.

She waited till he had finished and then she said in her low, thrilling voice, “That’s a very nice way to put it.”

And suddenly released from the iron bondage of fear and self-consciousness he took her in his arms.

They had come back from their honeymoon to a little grey house in Westminster with a wooden staircase jumping out of the middle of the hall, an octagonal book-lined room with huge armchairs and an immense sofa for him, and a long empty window-studded room for her, all shiny parquet and shiny deep cream paint and creamy lacquer and creamy curtains and touches of primrose and flame.

Upstairs there was a studio for him to draw in. He had thought, "I don't know where I shall draw. Can't draw and write in the same room—two things too different." And she had said, "You can't write in a studio or draw in a study. One thing would interfere with the other and both would be spoilt."

"My beloved," he had answered, "you know the innermost recesses of my thoughts."

Fortunately he had ceased to wonder about hers.

Their honeymoon had been perfect but in spite of her intimate understanding of him, he had sometimes felt little twinges of doubt as to his knowledge of her. They vanished almost immediately, but one enduring image remained. It was his marriage night. Drowned almost in the flood of his passion he had caught a glimpse of her before he went under. She didn't look disgusted or frightened or shocked but cool and untouched and aloof as if she were not implicated in this experience but were watching it from far away. Physical intimacy did not seem to reach her remoteness. But when he was telling her all about himself, his slightest reactions to the slightest experiences, the tiniest little details of his intricate psychological peculiarities, then her absorbed interest wiped out all tiresome impressions. The infectious gurgle of her laugh reassured him completely.

They settled down to life—a smooth, beautifully

run life. There were days when the perfection of his household surprised him and days when he took it for granted. It was winter and the house was full of leafless white lilac from Holland, and Poinsettias, arum lilies, violets and gardenias from Millet. The flames in the open fireplaces, the Paul Veronese heaps of fruit on the table, the Queen Anne silver, the Waterford glass, the white Wedgewood china, the old family cook, her niece the stillroom maid, the old family recipes, all combined to achieve the perfection of old fashioned country house comfort.

Adrian had never seen Millet. Amber had unaccountably—unaccountably to him—refused to take him there, if the delicate unanswerable reasons connected with his comfort which she produced could be called a refusal. Of course the country was very cold in winter. He tried to remember what she had said in the summer while they were engaged, but he couldn't. However, he soon forgot all about it, and from time to time she slipped off alone, having first arranged the most perfect plans for him, a very small and recondite man's dinner or a tête-à-tête evening with an irresistible incomprise.

He wondered how she had discovered that the incomprise was longing to pour out her heart to him. She was always leaving him alone with women who wanted to confide in him. His friendship was, they

explained (he could wish they didn't always use the same words), the one bright spot in their drab lives. He found himself looking at the diamonds that trickled all over one of these poor victims.

"You wear your chains," he said. What a delightful fancy! He made a note of it. "Bound by jewels," sounded poetic if you caught the right aspect but it might have rather a cinema ring. He must ask Amber.

"Doesn't your wife *mind*?" asked one of the distressed ones hopefully, "my having you like this all to myself?"

Amber had said she mustn't be selfish. He was a writer. He *must* have experience. It struck him suddenly that she ought to be jealous—just a little tiny bit jealous—it would be only natural, only right.

That night, as if in response to his unformulated grievance, she murmured, "Perhaps I am not quite so strong-minded as I thought I was— Perhaps after all. . . ." He was enchanted.

His marriage really was a success.

The next evening at dinner Amber deftly led the conversation to the subject of Mrs. R——, her husband, her discontent, her jewels.

"She wears her chains," said Adrian.

It had a great success.

"It is better thus," he thought. "An epigram should never be diffused into a sketch."

"Under A Shady Tree."

More musings by the author of "From A Pergola," appeared in April.

"We notice a new note—a deeper, a more human note—in the work of Mr. Adrian Rose. There is a throbbing pulse of life in 'Under A Shady Tree,' which was lacking in 'From A Pergola.'"

Adrian was enchanted about the "throbbing pulse." He began to think of writing a novel or even a play. Amber thought that some short stories might exploit the "human note" without losing the whimsical delicacy of his ordinary genre.

In the meantime he began to think of going back to his drawing. For some reason or other he didn't discuss this with Amber. He toyed with the idea alone, happy and a little guilty with his secret plans. Perhaps it might even end in a little show.

And then one day Amber said, "Don't you think it would be a nice change if you took up your charcoals again? We might even organise a little exhibition?"

He looked at her, horrified, why he couldn't tell.

"Are you a thought-reader?"

She smiled, "Not that I know of."

"Well, I don't mind telling you that there are times when a man likes to make his own plans."

"But of course, darling, I quite understand."

"Understand? You make a positive business of it. The understood never seem to be asked whether they forgive. Great fun being the patron and all that but what about the victim?" And he rushed out of the room.

After that he watched her suspiciously. He became obsessed by the thought that he had no control over what he was doing. What was the new "human note," the "throbbing pulse"? It was Amber. His book was a mere hollow farce, her personality shining through his words. His words? Perhaps they were her words! Every day he became more wretched. If it looked like rain and he picked up his umbrella in the hall he felt she had put it there meaning him to take it. When he started a daring or original topic of conversation and saw her smiling at him, he felt it had come from her.

He took to examining her, watching her, and he realised bitterly how little he knew her. She never talked about herself and like a detective he tried to catch her in some unconscious lapse into self-revelation.

And always he was fighting her, trying to free himself of her. Meanwhile, life went on. His charcoals were hung in the best light, the conversation was manœuvred up to the epigram—his epigram.

On his mother's birthday an immense bunch of

lilies of the valley—her favourite flower—lay on the breakfast table. He had meant to order them but he had forgotten.

“What are those for?” he asked sulkily.

“For your mother.”

“Why don’t you send them to her?”

“Because they are from you, darling. I’m going to send her something else.”

“What the devil do you mean by ordering *my* present to *my* mother?”

“But you always give her lilies of the valley. They are her favourite flower and she loves them, specially when they come from you.”

“I like ordering my own lilies.”

“But you had forgotten them, hadn’t you?”

“Oh for goodness sake don’t argue. I’m sick of being forestalled at every turn.”

His mother loved the flowers—loved him for having thought of them—loved him for having remembered her birthday in time to order them the day before, so that she should have them quite early in the morning.

Amber’s present didn’t come till next day. Lady Rose loved her and realised that she couldn’t be expected to remember her mother-in-law’s birthday till it arrived, when Adrian had brought her round to wish his mother many happy returns of the day. The whole incident made him furious.

The silent battle between husband and wife continued. He became daily more unstrung and she seemed daily more unconscious.

"Under A Shady Tree" had had a great success and he was invited to be the guest of honour at a literary dining club with speeches after dinner. Adrian loved an after dinner speech. The atmosphere of dessert and port and cigar smoke, the mixture of muzzy geniality and exuberant wit delighted him.

Amber chose the night in question to go down to Millet. She bade a tender farewell to her husband and he sallied forth exhilarated by his independence and the prospect of an excellent dinner in excellent company. The evening was a great success and his speech a positive triumph but as he walked home and tried to remember what he had said phrases of Amber's stuck out in his mind till he couldn't be sure whether he had used them or not. All night long they ran through his dreams like a semi-consciously hummed tune till he forced himself to wake up—only to find them as persistently haunting his thoughts.

Finally unable to bear it any longer he got up dashed into his clothes, examined Bradshaw, rushed to the station and caught the train to Millet.

There he found an old brougham drawn by a single decrepit old white horse with an even older

coachman on the box. "Mr. Rose, sir?" he enquired, "This is the Millet Court carriage; one of the carriages," he added with pride. "Miss Amber, Mrs. Rose that is, begging your pardon Sir, said but what you might be coming this morning."

His thoughts were in a whirl. He didn't notice the box hedges, the blaze of tulips, the transparent house. His face was white and set, he strode through the garden gate unseeing and unswerving straight to where his wife sat on a stone seat.

"How did you know I was coming?" his voice was strained.

She smiled. "I kind of felt you would."

"Why?"

"Well there are things you have wanted to say to me for a long time, aren't there?"

Resolutely he ignored this final touch in the nightmare. "Yes," he said, "there are things I want to say to you. I want to tell you that you have ruined my life. You with your understanding, you have cut me off from the unexpected. You have covered up this and exploited that, you have manœuvred my deficiencies, you have forestalled my impulses. I haven't been able to think or feel or act for myself. I have ceased to exist as an independent person. I am your creation, your puppet. God has never had to forgive for He has never been understood." He stopped breathless and then for a moment every-

thing was blotted out by his vision of her as she stood there, a lavender parasol over her head, her face in blue shadow, the sun catching in her hair. And all around her he seemed to see wave after wave of bluebells—And then he heard her low thrilling voice.

“My dear,” she said, “forgive me—I—I so understand.”

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X

THREE LOVE LETTERS

A LETTER 11 A. M.

THERE is such a lot of sunshine in my room and clouds of rainbow dust. When my maid pulled the curtains I felt a rush of light and my eyelids became warm and transparent and I felt ridiculously happy—as happy as a cat on a doorstep.

I forced myself not to say “Are there any letters” because I wanted to prolong the expectation. Do you remember when I was ill and you came to see me, I never said “Come in” at once when you knocked, because I loved to imagine your face and just how you would tiptoe into the room and to think of you coming nearer and nearer to me and reaching the bed and bending over me and—no—I mustn’t make myself want to be ill again. Surely it must make life longer and joy more lasting if you can live through some moments three times? To return to this morning, I made such a weak silly compromise. I said “Have the papers come,” and my maid went to look and brought them with a whole pile of letters which I let run through my fingers like sand. I toyed with them and felt the shapes of the envelopes and

the texture of the paper and my fingers trembled a little and I smiled. Then I read them very slowly, luxuriating in the details of an advertisement, carefully examining each item in every bill, deliberately concentrating my mind on Aunt May's inventory of domestic disasters (why is she a perfect fly-paper for illnesses, misfortunes, accidents and quarrels?), in order to give myself time to stretch the golden moment of looking forward. At last my heart was beating so fast that I could bear it no longer and I opened your letter. . . .

I love to see my name in your writing. I love to hear my name when you say it. It is a caress in itself, it means so much more than any term of endearment because it belongs so essentially to you and to me. I knew you were cross yesterday and ridiculously annoyed at our never being left alone. You ought to cultivate my plan of loving things in suspension. When I went up to you and said "Good-bye" and shook hands with you I felt that we had reached the apex of an intimacy. Surely you heard all the whispers in the world in my "Good-bye." Surely you felt the absolute surrender in my hand shake?

Isn't that what love means, to fill ordinary commonplace conventional things with magic and significance, not to need the moon and white scent-heavy flowers at night?

In a way I don't see why you should ever want to kiss me again. Do you understand what I mean, that I feel so merged, so eternally in your arms that I can hardly believe in the process of being taken into them again and again. Oh my dear, do you notice how one never can use superlatives when they really would mean something? They seem to slink away ashamed of their loose lives. After all we can't "make love" to one another. We both do it too well. This is not an incident, a game, an art; ours is not a love affair, it is life. So you must never again be cross when we are in a room full of people and I shake hands with you and say "good-bye." Of course I am not true to my creed. Thank God. Otherwise, if I pushed it to a logical conclusion I should say that it didn't really matter if we never met. Whereas, well—you know that I who loathe railways always travel by train now, simply because if I go away from you by motor I can't bring myself to start. I am always passing some miraculous blue-bell wood or an orchard in bloom or a Persian cat or a black purple lilac bush that—though I send them straight to you—I long to share with you on the spot.

Then, too, I get frightened. I believe that every motor bus is aiming at you, and I get a little jealous—of men. I like you to see women, lots of women—each one will remind you of me, will rub me in,

will widen the gap of my absence. Have you made me the vainest woman in the world? Would I deserve to be loved by you if I weren't? God bless you, my Precious.

II

12:30 P. M.

It has been such a long day! So hot that the air seemed solid. So glaring that the sun seemed all round one. I got up at 12 in order to be sure that everyone had dispersed. There is always the risk of finding someone reading or writing, so I went straight into the garden. I don't yet know who is staying here. There seem to me to be so many people that my only hope—or fear—is that I may know some of them by sight before I go.

This morning some had gone to church, some were on the river; some played lawn tennis. I sauntered happily along wondering what it would feel like if you were suddenly to appear, imagining the little stab of surprise and ecstasy with which I would realise that it was really you, and, lo and behold, Richard wandering aimlessly in quest of someone to make love to. I thought it unlike him to be so improvident as to leave the lady to chance, so I hastily hid behind a red hot poker and escaped out

of the walled garden only to run straight into Charles' arms.

"At last I have found you," he exclaimed, which was civil if untrue, and I said "Let's go and watch the lawn-tennis," because it seemed an impersonal occupation. What an idiotic thing to say! Everything is impersonal when you are not there. It is only you who make anything personal, who make everything personal.

At lunch we were reinforced by an Ambassador, who had motored down from London, and the Bishop, who had preached in the morning. They boomed, one on either side of our hostess, in perfect contentment, thoroughly enjoying *themselves*. What an admirably true and expressive phrase taken literally!

My neighbour praised you to me and I was modest and deprecating as if he had been praising me. Afterwards this struck me as rather ridiculous and very sublime. He asked me if you weren't a friend of mine? I suppose I looked amazed but then I realised that perhaps you are a friend of mine. I had never thought of it before. The right thing to say would be "You are my best friend," but I don't feel that a bit. I don't feel that we are sufficiently separate and independent. You are a part of me and if you weren't that you would be nothing—nothing at all. It is awful to think that there are

hundreds and thousands of people to-day who are going about with their hearts or souls amputated.

The Bishop is very much a man of the world—this world. I think he will feel rather lost in the next, only his psychological bump of locality is so good that it will probably take him home anywhere. The Ambassador is a Christian—in the true sense of the word. It was entertaining to see them together.

All the afternoon I played tennis and after tea I came up to rest because I wanted to be all alone with you in the scented dusk. I am all alone with you always, my beloved. But sometimes I want to purge the surface of life—to empty the passages and the ante-rooms. I want not only not to see or hear, but not to be seen or be heard, so that even the physical impression of me is yours alone. It is awful to have a surface that one can't withdraw.

Uncle Will asked where I had been all day. I told him. He said "Not your arms and legs but your *self*. Your thoughts." I explained to him that I had come round to his view of life, that I was tired of pomps and vanities and that henceforth I was going to adopt the geological attitude towards the world.

He laughed and shook his head.

What are you doing at this very moment my beloved? My sheets are like cool shiny pocket handkerchiefs, there is a white fur rug on the ground by

my bed. On the chair is my white velvet dress that you love. It looks like a lovely spilt silver liquid in the moonlight. The smell of the jasmine round my window is overpowering, my quilt has entangled a moonbeam sent me by you. I send it back because the only things that belong to me are those that I have given you. My own.

III

2 A. M.

I can't sleep. There is something oppressive in the atmosphere. I feel sick and giddy and my heart is so assertive, beating noisily and revengefully as if it bore me a grudge. I feel as if I were in the wings just waiting for my cue, nervous and miserable. There is always a tenseness when you are not there, a cumulative unreality. I have felt it all day and it has worked me up to fever pitch. I seemed to be a ghost wandering about in some meaningless void. It was not only that, I couldn't believe in the people, I could not even believe in the chairs and tables, it was tiring. You know how in fairy tales the lovely Princess is turned into a toad and has to wait for a kiss to release her, that was what I felt like—that nothing but your touch could make me into a human-being again.

After lunch a serious young man asserted mournfully, "You are very beautiful," and then as I hesitated between the equally coquettish courses of acceptance or rejection he added, "You are not happy." This, I indignantly repudiated but he brushed my protestations aside and looking particularly gloomy and oracular he stated, "You may not know, but I do, you lovely frail thing."

Tell me, did people always talk like that? I can't remember. Ever since I have known you reality has blazed at me and all my old life seems so hazy and shadowy—I have cast off my old self like a winter skin and people think I am the same person and talk to me on that assumption, which makes me feel a bewildered stranger. I am not of course thinking of the young man who was obviously working on some theory about women—a sort of roulette system.

Darling Heart, I feel a little calmer when I am writing to you. I want to go to sleep so that my dreams may bring me a little reality.

God bless you.

XI

THE SUCCESSOR

NEARLY every afternoon Rosemary and Mrs. Dearborn drove out together in a fly, making a leisurely escape from the garish, rhetorical scenery of the coast where the crimson rocks and sapphire sea seem to have caught God in a poster mood. As they got away from the face it shows to the world, the countryside assumed a more relaxed and loving expression, the hills were at once more intimate and more remote, the sky was unfaithful to the advertisements and became paler, more transparent, more lovely. They drove through nestling, crouching villages, drinking in with their eyes the silvery olives on their carpet of emerald jade, the fuzzy, outlineless almond trees posturing against the sky—so many pink smudges on the unbroken blue.

Both ladies had been ill, but Rosemary, though pale and thin and easily tired, was alive and radiant and easily revived—on the brink of life, on the threshold of adventure, ready to accept all challenges, laugh at all setbacks, take every risk and—She hadn't got any further than that, for she didn't want to settle down for a long time yet to that happiness which was of course waiting for her.

Mrs. Dearborn was making a slow, painful recovery, punctuated by relapses. She looked frail and faded and a little frayed—like some old brocade, made rare and precious and lovely by time and wear. It was not so much that she was old as that she was so essentially not new.

She loved being with Rosemary, who in exchange for experience brought her forgetfulness—thus belonging to the blessed who give more than they receive.

Rosemary had the vital, militant curiosity of youth. She believed in leading questions; they were frank, they were flattering, and, she maintained, they were tactful. In asking them you laid yourself open to being laughed at, being snubbed or being answered. Surely that was fairer than the circuitous trap-laden zigzag by which, observing the dictates of delicacy, your friends attempted to trip you up into a confidence.

They drove this afternoon for some time in silence, and then abruptly Rosemary said, "Tell me what your husband is like?" She knew that Mrs. Dearborn wasn't happy, and to her unhappiness meant an unhappy marriage, and an unhappy marriage must be either the wife's fault or the husband's. In this case, as she knew the wife, the fault was obviously the husband's.

Mrs. Dearborn opened her wide grey eyes even

wider than usual. She always looked a little surprised, a little bewildered, as if life had suddenly been brought to her notice—a guest forced on her when she was not at home. “I wonder,” she murmured vaguely, “—I mean I wonder how to describe him to you. He is very big——” Her voice trailed off.

Rosemary waited.

“I am afraid my illness has been a terrible expense. He has been very good about it.” Mrs. Dearborn managed to convey subtly that he had *not* been very good about it. “But of course it is so difficult for the people who are always well to understand bad health, and Charles thinks that I don’t lead the right sort of life, that I am not outdoors enough. He is a wonderful fisherman and a very good shot.”

“Why did you marry him?”

Mrs. Dearborn knew the answer to that. It was an answer she had made very often. “I was very young—only seventeen—and we were such a big family. My father and mother were enchanted when Charles proposed. He was a neighbour, with a big property and heaps of money—it seemed heaps to us. His mother always drove to church with a footman and wore such beautiful old lace. Old lace means nothing,” added Mrs. Dearborn with sudden, unexpected passion. “Nothing. You can’t

sell it. You can't cut it. It simply lies about in drawers and is the wrong length if ever you want to use it." She subsided. "And then there were the family jewels—big, yellowish diamonds that had been reset in 1850. It all seemed to suit Lady Amelia. She was a terrifying old lady, holding herself beautifully, invariably courteous to her inferiors and insolent to her equals."

"Did she like you?"

"I was penniless, but she thought it vulgar to mention money. In her way she was a great lady. 'The child is a gentlewoman,' she said. 'If she were a princess she could not be more and,' she added drily, 'she might be less!' When we married she insisted on moving into the dower-house, and all that first year, while I was expecting Tom, she was very good to me. Soon after he was born she died, and I felt that I had lost not only a friend but a rampart. I think she always knew I didn't love her son as I should. What she did not know was that I cared for someone else."

Rosemary was thrilled. Her green eyes were dancing.

"Tell me about him," she begged eagerly.

"He was tall and dark and ascetic looking. He reminded one of a crusader or some mediæval knight-errant. He was always talking to me about the injustices he was going to fight; and he said that, with

me to keep his armour bright—by his armour he meant his ideals—he thought he really could make the world a little happier.”

“And you deserted him?”

“Well, he was nineteen and I was seventeen. I married Charles; and he became a very distinguished novelist. His name is Hilary Severn.”

“Hilary Severn, *the* Hilary Severn? Then you are the heroine of all his books—the exquisite sensitive woman crushed by the brutality of the world! Sometimes, you know, I thought he capitalised misfortune, but now I see he was always thinking of you—and of course the coarse, unsensitive husbands were all Mr. Dearborn.”

Mrs. Dearborn smiled. “Don’t jump to conclusions. Hilary never knew Charles. He wrote and wished me happiness, and said that I should always be his great inspiration through life—his star I think he called it—but that he didn’t want to see me. It would be too painful.”

“Oh how wonderful! But of course he never married—or if he did it must have been years afterward—out of kindness.”

“I don’t know—I have never seen him since. I so seldom go to London.”

There was a silence. Rosemary thought, “Ah, the worst books must be true then. Life is like a serial—Hurrah!”

Mrs. Dearborn thought, "I wonder if his wife is like me at all, or if he married someone very young and fluffy and second-rate. I should *hate* her to be very young." She turned again to Rosemary, "My dear," she said. "You mustn't think that Charles is a villain. He is just the wrong man married to the wrong woman. He ought to have had a sporting, out-of-door wife. Someone whom he could have described in his favourite phrase as 'an awfully jolly little woman, plucky as they make 'em.' I was no good for that."

Mrs. Dearborn looked very pathetic; Rosemary's chivalry was aroused. "It is like you to defend him," she said. "He must be horrible." And Mrs. Dearborn left it at that.

A few days later Charles unexpectedly arrived. He was undoubtedly what is described as a splendid specimen of the human race, a very Viking of a man. Rosemary, as a loyal champion of his downtrodden wife, was frankly hostile from the first and full of ostentatious little attentions to her friend. But she found the attitude hard to keep up. Charles with his golf-clubs, his tennis-rackets, his fishing-rods, his irrepressible spirits, his inexhaustible plans for picnics and excursions of all sorts, seemed to be plotting fun for them all the time. And whether it was an expedition to Grasse for scent or to Monte Carlo for gambling, his frank enjoyment of everything and his

efficient control of the practical arrangements, made him invaluable either as a host or a guest. True, his sense of humour was of the private-school boy variety. He was always talking of a "hole in his racket," "a hand like a foot," and making jokes in which beds or whiskey bottles played prominent parts. Every night he said to his wife, "Well, we must go to our baskets; or perhaps I should say, in more refined language, to Bedlam." And every morning he said to Rosemary, "Ho, ho! Miss Rosemary, for whom are we so beautiful to-day?" And yet he wasn't somehow very like a brute.

Mrs. Dearborn was always very sweet to her husband and very patient. To see her smile at one of his jokes was to realise that it was a very bad joke indeed, and that she was a very good wife. Nobody could accuse her of ever having shown a sign of irritation even when Charles was at his most boisterous and his most genial. The way her face emptied of all expression when he said "the Missus," or "my old gal," was more eloquent than any comment. She never shrugged her shoulders or looked round for pity. She was an artist.

Rosemary had refreshed her tremendously. It was a long time since she had talked about herself to such a sympathetic audience—she was always so buried in Cumberland—and it was a very long time indeed since she had talked about Hil-

ary. But now she found herself thinking of him more than she had ever done. The tone of his voice, the things he had said to her, the reverent adoration with which he had surrounded her—she remembered them all. And what care he had taken of her! How he had always wrapped her up. He was so afraid of drafts for her, so anxious about her health, so aware of her fragility. “You are so frail, Lily,” he used to say, “I am afraid to touch you, to look at you even. I sometimes am haunted by the thought that you may evaporate before my eyes.”

And he had so loved her to be called “Lily.” He was always searching for new poems in which her name appeared—ransacking the literatures of the world for what he called a “mention of her.”

Charles had said, “I wonder what they wanted to give you a housemaid’s name like Lily for. No accounting for parents, is there?” She had been so relieved that he had not loved her name. She would have hated Hilary to have to share anything with him.

“What do you think of my husband, Rosemary?” asked Mrs. Dearborn one day.

Rosemary blushed. “I don’t know—Of course, I see he can’t appreciate you——” Mrs. Dearborn winced. “That of course a woman like you wouldn’t mean anything to him. He isn’t fastidious or sensi-

tive I know—but I can't help liking him all the same."

Mrs. Dearborn was disappointed.

"You don't mind, do you?"

Mrs. Dearborn looked contemptuously at Rosemary. "Mind, dear child? What an extraordinary idea. I long for you to love Charles. I wish more people did."

* * * * *

Mrs. Dearborn was always excited when she was in London. There was so much to see and so many things she wanted to get. She always ended by buying very little, and choosing clothes that would be absolutely unsuited to the country. She adored dresses and she refused to spoil her holiday by remembering Cumberland. She always regretted this when she got back home, but she never mended her ways.

To-night she was dining with Rosemary's father and mother, and Rosemary had begged her to look her best. She was wearing a periwinkle-blue chiffon dress, and a big bunch of delicious real Parma violets. She could feel little waves of perfume coming up to her from them. Her eyes were starry with excitement as she walked into the drawing-room; there was a faint unconscious smile of pure pleasure on her lips. After dinner she was going to a ball; it made her feel so young and gay.

Rosemary dashed to meet her, flushed and radiant, and soon the six people in the room had been introduced to her—that is to say that she had heard some mumbled, murmured names, not one of which had emerged clearly.

At dinner she sat between Rosemary's father and a tall, dark man with steel-grey hair and steel-grey eyes. He appeared very stern and rather prosperous. His lips were thin and looked as if he repressed them continually. They were not allowed to be expressive and his smile was a wintry affair. His face was beautifully cut. He sat on the edge of his chair as if afraid to let himself go to the extent of sitting down comfortably. He talked to her en profile.

"If I were wearing a yashmak he would see more of me," she thought irritably. He seemed to be trying to make her feel guilty. She was disagreeably reminded of the cold pudding she was made to eat as a child, while the nurse rubbed in all the little starving children. "A happy, cared-for woman like you doesn't know——" he plunged into a description of some slum. She wished he wouldn't spoil her little outing. She so rarely had a treat.

Then there was a pause in the conversation, and a glowing panegyric of Jane Austen and her novels entangled the general attention. "No one has her sense of form. Her points are pointed instead of

being underlined. Her perfection of balance produces perfection of emphasis."

Lily was delighted. She looked at her neighbour. His voice was booming. "She had no range. Tragedy was not even a word to her."

"Tragedy is hardly more than a word to the people who use it most often," retorted Jane's champion heatedly. "You use a large canvas and perhaps you take the world in even though you be a mere scene painter. No one can fake a cameo if it is not perfect. It is nothing.

"Only the artists interest me whose hearts beat in unison with the poignant misery of the world. If you have not felt that you have not lived. Pity is essential." Lily felt an ever-growing irritation, but she was quite incapable of plunging into the conversation. After all she had nothing against pity.

"Mr. Severn has always been a knight-errant," said Rosemary's mother pacifically.

Severn—knight-errant—Mrs. Dearborn's mind was in a whirl. For one overwhelming moment she thought she was going to faint. Surely it was too horrible to be true. This man beside her the substance of her dreams whose memory had warmed her during all these bleak, barren years? Bitterness welled up within her.

"I don't think you remember me. My name is

Lily." Her voice was very clear and low and cold.

He looked at her now and she thought she saw a look of consternation, of fear almost (perhaps she was exaggerating) cross his face. His voice had changed.

"Lily," he said—"my dear. I have thought about you so much, so often. Are you happy? Tell me?"

"I am the sort of woman you have always written about."

"It had to be so," he said. A new wave of irritation swept over her at his complacent acceptance of her unhappiness. Her life was a testimonial to his attitude, a piece of evidence, an added proof that he was right. She wondered if he ever forgave people for being happy. Capitalized misfortune—she remembered Rosemary's phrase—and his art was the interest on it. How clearly she was thinking! She never seemed to have thought clearly before. She had not disappointed him. She too had been a failure. An icy curiosity came over her. "Are you married?" she asked.

"Yes. She was the wife of a—a drunkard. I ran away with her and I hope I have been able to bring a little brightness into her life."

No impulse even there. Lily was beginning to feel flippant. "It had to be so," she said as they got up from the table.

But as she drove back to her hotel, (she had

danced till 3) she felt an emptiness she had never before known.

“Poor Rosemary, planning a romance and killing one,” she mused. And then, “How nice. I haven’t an illusion left in the world. I feel so care-free.”

The next day she returned to Cumberland. All the way, she thought of her home, her dog, her wonderful, herbaceous border—her Princess of Wales violets, the gardenias and poinsettias that were to be the pride of her winter conservatory. She must try to have a lot of flowers ready for Tom when he got home from India for Christmas. She did *love* him so.

She thought of Charles and how he would be at the station with the dog-cart and two spaniels. He would be having a joke with the station-master—probably an old joke which had long ago lost its point, but which was all the more significant for that. He would give her a resounding kiss and toss her up into the dog-cart. “Light as a feather,” he would say—“figure of a girl of eighteen.”

Charles was gloriously fixed and reliable (there was a time when she had called it stationary and monotonous); he was so clumsy and so faithful and so good—in a way, too, she felt him helpless in his hopeless inability to express himself or understand her. The thought of his helplessness touched her. She smiled tenderly. A curiously glowing feeling

was round her heart. *Could* she—*did* she love Charles?

The train drew up at the station. Happily, eagerly, like a young bride she looked out of the windows. A sickening fear clutched her heart. . . . No, there he was—there were the spaniels—there was the station-master. An unreasoning joy possessed her. She darted out of the carriage and threw herself with a defiant gesture of abandon into her husband's arms.

"*I am* glad to be home," she whispered.

Her radiant smile surprised even the station-master. "There is no place like home," she said to him. He had never heard her talk like that before.

Charles tossed her into the dog-cart and they drove through the cornfields, a red-gold earth and a red-gold sky. He talked about the crops and she drank in the beauty of the evening and told herself what a fine, simple man he was. She didn't listen to what he was saying. . . .

"I want to look lovely," she said to her maid.

Robbins was amazed. Her mistress didn't usually want to look lovely alone in Cumberland. She put on a silvery tea-gown and white jasmine in her hair and in her bosom. "You look topping," said Charles; and she flushed with pleasure.

During dinner he told her all the news. Of how

little milk Pansy was giving, and that Miss Marjoribanks wanted to marry the curate. "How splendid!" said Lily. "Does she love him?"

"I suppose so," Charles was doubtful—"but—old-maids can't be choosers." His hearty laugh rang out: "He's got no chin you know, so I don't suppose he has a dog's chance of escaping."

After dinner they sat on the terrace under a red-gold harvest moon. Suddenly she sat down on his knee.

"Charles, do you very much wish you had married a different sort of woman?"

He felt very elated, very shy, very nonplussed. "My dear, at the bottom, you know there is only you."

This his confession of faithfulness and infidelity. That night she wrote:

Dear Hilary:

I want to tell you that meeting you last night brought me great happiness.

L. D.

XII

AS IT WAS IN THE BEGINNING

DOES it disturb you if I read?"

"Not a bit, but don't wake me up when you put the light out."

"No."

"Good-night my darling."

"Good-night my darling."

"Bless you—Say bless you."

"Why? Because it means I am not going to say anything more?"

"Ah, if it only meant that!"

He was bantering her.

"Do you love me?"

As she asked the question she was conscious that it was serious, terribly serious. He wouldn't know that. He would simply think it was her usual ridiculous demand for verbal assurances.

"God how I have loved you!"

"But you do still love me?"

"Of course, goose, good-night."

"Bless you—Say bless you."

"Bless you. Swear not to wake me up when you put the light out."

"I swear."

He turned over and was fast asleep in a moment.

She watched him. Only a year ago he would have been tingling with awakeness at having her there beside him. He would have been trembling with passion forcibly controlled into tenderness. Or it might have broken loose as it sometimes had done. . . . She hadn't liked it. How could one like it unless one were completely merged in it? But passion had seemed to her an inevitable part of the love that she had craved for, and now it had ceased to be a permanent state and become an intermittent function. Did she want it back? Surely not. And yet she wanted the guarantee. She was wretchedly unconvinced by the present state of affairs which were just what she had longed for a year ago. Suddenly he turned and taking her in his arms he crushed her to him with an almost mad violence. Brutally he pressed her lips with his until they parted with the pain and all the time he murmured strange appeals and strange demands. She was frightened and fascinated. Never before had she felt so helpless, so impotent, so dominated. Her body was limp and she had no control over her limbs. Her will power, too, was oozing away. Gradually his hold relaxed. He almost fell away from her. She was too dazed to speak. He turned round with a deep sigh and began the regular breathing of untroubled sleep. She lay awake think-

ing. So it wasn't dead, just suppressed. It had come back and she liked it. Thank God, she prayed exultantly, as she fell into a radiant sleep.

"It was so strange," he said next morning. "I dreamt of a woman who was once my mistress,—I haven't seen her for years—and then I thought I saw you watching me and gradually both of you faded away and I slept the sleep of the just."

"The sleep of a husband?"

He must have heard the bitterness she couldn't quite keep out of her voice.

"Of a lover," he said smiling at her.

But she shook her head.

XIII

THE OLD STORY

I HAVE everything in the world to make me happy," Margaret stated to herself miserably and proceeded to make an inventory of all of those ingredients that so resolutely refused to merge into contentment. "I have the most delightful husband." Her mind dwelt on Michael, his immense charm, his beautiful manners, the quietly valuable quality of his brain, the fact that if breeding meant anything at all it meant him—the fastidious aristocrat to whom all moral lapses were lapses of taste, who believed in public service, who delighted in human nature, who ate and drank and gambled and made love, endowing each in turn with his own indefinable distinction—and whose form of relaxation—she couldn't understand it—was second rate women, girls under twenty, chandeliers, rag-time, restaurants. Shooting and fishing too, of course, golf and racquets, but a Cabinet Minister under 45, with a brilliant present, a still more brilliant future, no money and estates which are an entailed liability has more time by night than by day.

She remembered the time when she had first

known him. She had been a girl under twenty, *the* girl under twenty she sometimes felt—it seemed ridiculous and remote now—and his wife had looked so much older than he did. He had fallen passionately in love with her, irresistibly, at first sight. She had only discovered it much later and it had come as a great shock, a nervous shock, a moral shock. Those were the days of her youth, her hardness, glorious days of untempted intolerance and absolute standards of right and wrong. She hadn't been very critical of other people, only very proud of her own rigid fastidiousness, her crisp cold purity, the effortless ease with which she kept to the narrowest of paths. She had felt crumpled and tarnished by his passion and she hadn't forgiven him easily. The sight of his wife had made her feel guilty and tender, miserable and ill at ease. Him, she could not bear to see; it got on her nerves to be in a room with him and the humble mute appeal in his eyes moved her alternately to pity and rage. All the laughter had gone out of their relationship and it had become an impossible thing. His wife had been very gentle, very loving. It had surprised her. Ann Truro was a narrow, passionate, concentrated woman, who loved her husband and children with a fierce jealous love. Farouche and uncompromising, with the shyness of a wild animal, she wrapped up her intense sensitiveness in layers of cold reserve. She reminded Mar-

garet of bleak magnificent moor lands with sudden headstrong rushes of water. There was something elemental about her which peeped through the grave dignity of the mediæval chatelaine. You could see two pictures of her—in one she was the centre of embroidering ladies and humming spinning-wheels, in the other you saw her knee deep in wet heather battling undaunted with wind and rain. In neither was there a place—artistically—for Michael, the delightful quizzical man of the world who looked with tender amusement at the colliding forces of life, who never denounced because he never believed, who knew no disillusionment because he had known no illusions. Examining his fellow creatures with the dispassionate scientific delight of an etymologist, his sympathy appeared perfect because of the perfection of his understanding. The doors and windows of his mind were always open and his psychological hospitality reaped a rich harvest. He himself observed a rigid code of loyalty, devotion, hard work, courage, disinterestedness. This was his only form of arrogance and intolerance. He resolutely set himself a far higher standard than he would allow to the rest of the world.

Michael loved an open house where his friends, his acquaintances, his enemies and his oddities could congregate at all hours and smoke till you could only

see dim blurred faces and talk till your head went round like a piano stool.

Bewildered and miserable, Ann would sit in a rocking-chair in a corner, aloof and stiff, while waves of banter and laughter and wit broke over the room but always short of her. She knew it was her own fault but she couldn't help it. She would sit thinking of the old days when they had loved one another with an all embracing, all-excluding love, of how they had walked hand-in-hand over the hills at night dreaming of their wonderful star-lit future.

She loved him just as much now though, God knew, she hated this chandelier-lit menagerie. "I suppose the stars are still outside," she thought bitterly and people said, "What a difficult trying wife poor Michael has got."

She had never become accustomed to her husband's love of very young girls. She had always been jealous of them and hated them till Margaret—Margaret the radiant, the irrepressible, the irresistible, gay and gurgling and bubbling, kitten-like, flower-like, entrancing, enchanting. Ann had found herself dragged forcibly into the rough and tumble of wits in her own house, forced out of her dark box on to the stage, made to enjoy herself. She had come to love Margaret with the hungry loneliness with which she loved her own children. And then one day this chosen child came to her white, wan, wide-

eyed, listless, limp and forlorn, very pathetic in her extinguished sunshine. Ann realised what had happened and she felt a rage with her husband that had nothing personal in it but was rather outraged mother-love.

Margaret didn't come often after that—only just often enough to keep up appearances. What appearances, she sometimes wondered? She was sure that Ann knew what had happened but was prevented by loyalty to her husband from hinting at it. Michael—she thought it odd—still liked seeing her. Everything about her was loaded with significance for him—the intonations of her voice, her queer little gestures (every time she moved her hands he thought they were touching him and he felt a little shiver go down his spine) the way she turned her head. It seemed strange to her that he could bear the suspension of their old intimacy, the perfunctory nervous commonplaces of their intercourse. She was too young to know that loving her as he did her insight, her sympathy, her wit were nothing to him. If she talked about the weather or Bradshaw it was all the same. He only wanted to see her, to hear her, to touch her, to know that she was there, to weave patterns of her into his dreams.

Every visit to his house was misery to her. Covered from head to foot in armour she would plunge into battle, talking in what seemed to her a strange

hard voice, very brilliant, very witty with a brightness that was centuries away from her old flames and shadows.

Michael would smile at her with that charming smile she knew so well, his eyes all wrinkled up, teasing her, laughing at her, pretending to trip her up as he rushed her along. His whimsical reception of her enthusiasms made them seem a little ridiculous,—he shrugged civilly at her moral indignation to hide a yawn. Her brain that had attracted him so much when he first knew her had become quite irrelevant. Perhaps, he thought, it had always been her triumphant youth that had swept him off his feet. His mind played with the amusing thesis—was youth a part of her—just an item—or was she the ambassadress of youth?

In all their discussions Ann passionately championed Margaret. Michael felt a certain distaste for their alliance, it offended his taste and he blamed his wife for it—Margaret after all was so young. . . .

Again that confounded word; he really must exorcise it, he certainly wasn't old enough for it to have become an obsession. The two women liking one another was after all a convenience but in a way he loved them both too much to enjoy that view. Ann was his wife, the mother of his children and Margaret was no more than a child. . . . Their association was repellent to him and he was angry with them

both. And then quite suddenly Ann died—all in a moment of heart failure. Michael was miserable.

A hundred old forgotten pictures of their courtship flashed back into his memory, of their honeymoon, of those awful hours when his wife was enduring the tortures of the damned giving birth to his child. He remembered, too, little old forgotten jokes, irrelevant, unimportant things that they had laughed at together, all the strange adhesive intimacies of their common life. The old nearness that the living woman had so yearned for came back now that she was gone. It had come back without her.

For a year Michael plunged into work, refused to see his friends, shut himself up with his remorse and his children. Then the sight of almond blossom and the smell of lilac lured him back into life. On his way home from his office he loitered, he smiled to himself, he hummed. Suddenly he thought of Margaret. He went straight to her.

* * * * *

Three months later she was his wife. She never could understand just why she had married him. She had never been in love with him and he only touched her physically at all when he was on her nerves. She couldn't surely be fool enough to feel that he was a legacy from Ann, and she certainly didn't particularly want to be a mother to his chil-

dren—children that were, she reflected, so particularly, so essentially not her children. And yet she had accepted him. He had played such a part in her life, had been such a part of it. He seemed to have become inextricably woven into the pattern of her fate. She had felt a dummy in the hands of Providence and Providence had been allied to him. She could never quite understand why she had felt so will-tied. Her family and friends had been delighted. Michael was always so charming to everyone, so considerate—and how brilliant, what a wonderful career, the family jewels too were so amusing in their old settings, she mustn't dream of changing them. Of course, it was a pity that the ancestral home had to be let but one couldn't have everything. Step-children, too, were perhaps rather a trial (so tiresome that he should have had a son by his first wife) but such a responsibility, almost one might say a privilege, an opportunity. To all of this Margaret assented listlessly—though in her gayer moments she wondered if “amusing” was really the last word on the huge crescents and stars, the pearls like old teeth, and the massive cameos that formed the family jewels. That Michael was charming, considerate and brilliant, she couldn't deny. . . . She couldn't deny it to-day any more than she could deny it then.

“I have the most delightful husband,” she re-

peated in a dissatisfied voice and in evidence of what she was saying he walked into the room.

"My dear, you will be late for dinner." He took her hand and kissed it. "Where is your maid?"

"She has gone out."

A certain tonelessness in her voice struck him.

"Are you tired?"

"A little tired."

"You look it."

Somehow that was the last straw. She felt near tears. If only he had said that she looked well, that she looked fresh, that she looked pretty. Anything to pull her out of this morass of discouragement into which she was sinking.

"I think," he said stroking her hair, "that you need a little country. Why should you stay in London in this hot weather? You must not let me be too selfish, you know."

A wave of hopelessness came over her. She longed to say:

"I don't want anything except to be wanted. I long for you to make ceaseless, impossible demands on me," but instead she said:

"I think it would do me good. I think I will go away for a few days."

She heard him whistling in his bath. How young he was! She laughed; he was twenty years older than she was. As they walked downstairs he took

her arm and pressed it a little. "Darling," he murmured. Again she wanted to cry. She wished she were not too tired to laugh. They had people dining and people coming in after dinner. Margaret, unlike Ann, liked entertaining, was amused by contrasts and enjoyed oddities. But to-night she felt so listless that each remark she made was like lifting a heavy weight. "The dumb-bell stage," she called it.

The lovely daughter of Michael's secretary was dining, thrilled to be there, to be able to laugh and talk with Michael. Margaret knew that her presence subdued her a little and tried to counteract the impression. She encouraged Ruby's sallies and laughed at them till the girl felt quite at her ease and rattled on, her conversation studded with allusions to little private jokes, and references to events of which Margaret was unconscious.

"Was I like that?" she wondered. "I don't think I can have been or Ann wouldn't have loved me, but perhaps it was only that she was a more generous woman than I am."

"My wife can't stand him, can you dear heart?" she heard Michael say and looking up she caught a startled expression on Ruby's face. And with a rush of remembrance it came back to her—the first time that she had heard him say "dear heart" to Ann and what a strange unaccountable shock it had

given her. Afterwards she had listened for his terms of endearment and whenever he had been lover-like with his wife it had seemed to her a Judas kiss. She was sure that was not what Ruby felt—rather the child was suddenly struck with the thought that these two people in front of her were not mere official connections, pieces of furnitures in one another's lives, linked together by a name, but that they had once been lovers, eloquent and tongue-tied and on fire and that there was still something left even if it was only a word. After dinner the room filled with people and smoke and noise. Ruby sat on a sofa with Michael, her eyes were shining, her cheeks were flushed and she was bending towards him.

Margaret sat in a corner in a rocking-chair thinking. "May I come and talk to you, Lady Truro?" a man brought up his chair. "After all," thought Margaret, "I am very accessible."

"You don't usually sit right away here in this corner. It reminds me . . ." he bit his lip.

She smiled.

"It reminds you of Ann. You were going to say? She always sat here."

"Yes, of course. How silly of me to have stopped. You were one of the few people she loved—I remember the way her face lit up when you came into the room. You always dragged her forward.

Poor Ann! She had a difficult nature and she was somehow always out of things."

Margaret smiled again.

"She had a charming husband."

"So have you."

"Yes," she said, "the same husband."

XIV

THE PILGRIMAGE

MY father was one of the most brilliant men I have ever known but as he refused to choose any of the ordinary paths of mental activity his name has remained a family name when it should have become more exclusively his own. If anything my mother's famous beauty cast far more lustre on it than his genius—which preferred to bask in the sunshine of intimacy or recline indolently in the shady backwaters of privacy and leisure. And yet in a way he was an adventurer—or rather an adventurous scientist. He was often called cynical but that was not true—he was far too dispassionate, too little of a sentimentalist to be tempted by inverted sentimentalism. Above all things he was a collector—a collector of impressions. His psychological bibelots were not for everyone. Some indeed lay open in the vitime of his everyday conversation but many more lay hidden in drawers opened only for the elect.

Undoubtedly, in a way, my mother was one of his masterpieces. Her beauty seemed to be enhanced by every hour and every season. At forty suddenly her hair had gone snow white. The primrose, the daffo-

dil, the flame, the gold, the black, the emerald, the ruby of her youth gave way to grey and silver, pale jade and faint turquoise, shell pink and dim lavender. Her loveliness had shifted. The hours of the day conspired to set her. The hard coat and skirt, the high collar, the small hat, the neat veil of morning, the caressing charmeuse that followed, the trailing chiffon mysteries of her tea-gown, the white velvet or the cloth of silver that launched her triumphantly at night, who was to choose between them? Summer and winter followed suit. Whether you saw her emerging from crisp organdy or clinging crêpe de chine, stiff grey astrakan or melting chinchilla always it was the same. This moment you said to yourself "She has reached the climax of her loveliness."

My father delighted in perfection. He had discovered it in her and promptly made it his own. I don't know if he ever regretted the unfillable quality of her emptiness. Rather I think it amused him to see the violent passions she inspired, to hear her low thrilling voice weigh down her meaningless murmurs with significance. To many of her victims the very incompleteness of her sentences was a form of divine loyalty. One young poet had described her soul as a fluttering, desperate bird beating its wings on the bars of her marvellous loveliness. At this her lazy smile looked very wise. She thought my father

an ideal husband. He was always right about her clothes and after all he was the greatest living expert on her beauty. Obviously he loved her but—well he didn't love her inconveniently. Her attitude towards me was different. I was an accident. A bit of unchosen furniture in her life,—she who chose everything so carefully. While she could still dress me as a Kate Greenaway, she could enjoy me—but there followed a barren period till I grew up and she could group me again. I was so immense that I more particularly underlined her fragility and slightness and she looked so young that my being her son rather enhanced than detracted from her youth.

So when I left Oxford the tableau vivant was re-established.

My father was the most delightful talker I have ever met. He could juggle with the moment and fish fancies out of the most unpromising topics. With him soap and water inevitably turned into rainbow-tinted bubbles. Nor was he without the heavy artillery of knowledge. He would mass his infantry of facts to reinforce the light cavalry of his wit, and the dash and élan of his brilliance would sometimes mask the depth of his scholarship and understanding.

I have often wondered how a man of so many parts could have turned his life to so little account. Once I murmured something about his wasting his great gifts.

“What is wasting your time?” he asked. “Rushing about and fraying your nerves in order to be called a man of action? Leisure is a vocation invented for people who can think.”

The two things my father really loved were music and myself. But I always felt somehow that there must have been someone else, someone all satisfying. I don't know what my conviction came from, perhaps it was the feeling that without some strong, fast current, deep and hidden through it had to be, bits of him would have frozen. My mother could never have stirred the real man and the fact that he stood her so graciously, admired her so unfailingly, showed that she had never mattered enough even to be a disappointment. Once you had ceased to be surprised at her having borne a child—so incredible did it seem that she should ever have had any contact with reality—you ceased to think of her at all except when you drew in your breath at her dazzling beauty. But the fact that she was so easily “placed” psychologically made me wonder all the more about that inner life of my father's of which no murmur or hint had ever reached me but in the existence of which I so unfalteringly believed.

And then, one day, quite by accident, when I was looking for something in his room, I came across an old photograph. It was shiny and thick with the photographer's name at the bottom in gold and no

artist had arranged the lighting. It seemed, in fact, hardly to have emerged from the daguerreotype stage. But it struck me partly because of my father's loathing of photographs and partly because of the "sitter's" face. She was holding on a shawl, her very long fingers clutching it a little nervously while her heavy lidded eyes peered through the curtain of her lashes with the expression of a watcher looking unseen into a room. Her big curly mouth had square corners and her nostrils seemed cut out in cardboard. Her chin was square, her forehead wide and her hair looked lighter than her skin. I felt like a detective on his first case suddenly coming across a clue of first rate importance. How was I to follow it up? I didn't want to appear to be prying into my father's private concerns, still less did I want to shut off the possibility of a confidence from him by some indiscreet question. But I was burning with curiosity and at the best of times I am not particularly patient.

After several days of fruitless hope that providence would at least provide me with an apple to pick (Eve seemed to me to have had all the advantages) I plunged desperately. My father and I were sitting smoking by a particularly rosy and welcoming fire and he was talking about love and love affairs and marriage—lightly but with all his infinite insight, his wide human wisdom.

"Father forgive me," I floundered, "has no one ever, hasn't anyone, I mean, ever really meant anything, mattered?"

He looked at me, wiped his glasses, smiling a little at my discomfiture.

"Yes," he said, "I have loved one woman in my life. I used the word love," he added quietly, "in the sense in which it means everything that it can mean."

There was a silence and then, unable to control myself:

"Could you bear to tell me about her? What she was like?" I wondered why I used the past tense.

"She was more alive than anyone I have ever met. With more 'follow through' in everything. It sounds a ridiculous phrase to use but somehow ordinary words don't describe her. When you were with her everything became so thrilling, seemed so worth while. You looked at the world through her eyes and you saw miracles all round you. The commonplace, the dull, the everyday had disappeared. She believed that people were interesting and wonderful and they became it. She wanted people to be happy and she made them happy—with her charity really did mean love. She was always preyed on and tired out by the dozens of worthless people who clung to her," his voice had changed, the

old memory of that irritation—the irritation of not having her to himself—had come back to him.

“And then of course there was her art—her wonderful art. The world was at her feet. ‘I wish it were at my side’ she would say with her lovely whimsical smile. She wasn’t beautiful and oh, so far from pretty, but her features had a fascinating way of playing with one another as if her eyebrows gave a hint to her eyes which in their time whispered a cue to her mouth. She was so lithe and strong and supple with an indolent grace that masked it. What is the good of my fumbling on trying to describe magic? If you could have seen her—but you never will. She was Life.” And he got up, smiled, lit his candle and went to bed.

I tried to piece the evidence together. The world was at her feet—her wonderful art. She must have been an actress or a singer. The “world” is not “at the feet” of writers.

Surreptitiously I searched London for photographs of old artists but it seemed as if conspiracy had arranged to conceal my lady with the shawl. Through many a drawer of musty unwanted postcards I burrowed but always she eluded me. Any thick, shiny photograph drew me like a magnet—but in vain. Discouraged, I prayed to providence, and one afternoon my prayer was answered.

My mother was coming down to Roehampton to

watch me play polo or rather to hold her court under the trees, and I was to pick her up at her corsetiere's. I arrived at the appointed time and settled down in the front room to wait, when, lo and behold, I found on the wall a wire entanglement packed with photographs—Isolde and the Merry Widow, Lady Teazle and Mary Queen of Scots, with a generous sprinkling of ladies in picture hats and patches, looked down at me. Eyes outsmiled teeth, teeth outshone eyes, while large sprawling writings assured the world that Mme. Isabelle was a paragon among corsetieres.

Trembling I got up shyly with a feeling of dedication. I looked and there between Boadicea and a pierrette was my lady of the shawl. I thought I saw an amused glance of recognition behind that thick fringe of eyelashes, but I was too excited to be sure.

"I am so sorry to have kept you waiting." At that moment my mother's immaculate perfection was to me nothing but a white blur. I tried to force my voice to sound natural.

"Who is that?" I asked in the hoarse tones of a hero in melodrama.

"Oh don't you know? But of course you are too young to have heard of her. That was Maddalena Moro, some people thought her the greatest singer of her age."

All the things I had ever heard of her crowded into my reeling mind but there was only one clear thought in my head.

"Why do you say 'was.' Is she dead?"

My mother shrugged her shoulders.

"I wonder. Who knows? Those people disappear and one doesn't hear of them any more. She retired suddenly at forty. No one knew why. Her voice was as beautiful as ever, I believe. You should ask your father about her. He knew her quite well, I think."

"Knew her quite well." So my mother had known nothing, had guessed nothing, had suspected nothing.

"I thought her rather an ugly woman though she was certainly magnetic. She seemed to look through your clothes and talked of such odd things. I think it is so very ill-bred to be socially disconcerting and that she certainly was. And then her movements were so strange and sudden, not at all suited to private life. But it always seems to me a mistake to see those stage people out of their setting. And then defrauded out of her customary incense, 'Do you like this dress? I am not sure about it,' but when I gave her my quite sincere opinion she relaxed into the purr of a satisfied Persian cat."

"The greatest singer I have ever heard?" the critic was delightfully conscious that everyone was listen-

ing to him. "Why I think I fell plump for Maddalena Moro. Her colouratura was like a girl walking into the garden before breakfast and singing for sheer love of the birds and the dew. Her trills were just little patches of high spirits, little private competitions with a particular lark. And her tragic singing was marvellous too. It had the inevitability of fate. You never felt that she could have used any other word or any other note to express what she wanted to. She had that rarest of all gifts, she always seemed to be improvising."

"And why did she retire so young?" I asked.

"No one knew. I remember her saying to me once, 'I know I shall go on singing till my voice is cracked, but you must tell me when it becomes too bad to be true. You see I simply can't stop. I love it so.'"

"And when did you see her last?"

"When? I don't remember the exact date. She had been singing the 'Queen of the Night' with more abandon, with more control than ever—but then that was the impression one carried away each time that one heard her. I recall that particular occasion because an extraordinary thing happened. She sang out of tune three times. It was so incredible, so grotesque that I realised that she must be ill, so I went round, anxious about her, full of sympathy. I knew exactly what she must be feeling about it.

Her ear was so perfect. She was one of the few singers I have ever seen who was not only an artist—that is rare enough—but even a musician. When I reached her dressing room she was flushed and elated, with shining eyes and a peculiar, relaxed position that was with her a symbol of past strain and present triumph. I came up full of sympathy. ‘Never,’ she said, ‘have I sung like that. Is it not so, Hein?’ ”

“‘Of course not,’ I said, and she smiled, that lovely radiant smile that made you feel as if she were throwing you a bit of life. Something undreamt of, something alive, something real, something fragrant. She gave me her hand and she said, ‘I knew that to-night you would be with me.’ It seemed to me so pathetic—this night—the first on which she had ever failed—was after all the night of her friends. I murmured something commonplace about being always with her when she would accept me as a companion—an admirer, a confessor, a friend—anything. I knew of course that she had only one lover.”

“Oh, do tell us about him—Name, Name!”
There was a chorus.

“Oh,” the critic caught sight of me and blushed, “all that is ancient history.”

“Tell me,” I asked him later in an undertone, sacrificing my father for the first and only time in

my life, "where is she now. I have special reasons for wanting to know."

Doubtfully he looked at me. "I have not seen her for many years," he said. "She married an Italian doctor. This is her address. Can I trust you?"—he hesitated. "She is, I think, happy and probably she is at peace."

"I do not want her resurrection," I said. "I am visiting the shrine of the dead."

"Peace be to her," he said, and I thanked him.

* * * * *

It was early April and the Easter holidays had begun. I had quite made up my mind to go to Italy but I was nervous and embarrassed about mentioning it. The things that go on in the innermost recesses of your heart have a disconcerting way of making you feel transparent. And in this case I had my father's super-human acumen to deal with. The very name Madeleine which belonged to a plain cousin of ours to whom my mother was occasionally "kind" and who always spent unnoticed weeks in our midst, would make me start and give me the ridiculous feeling of being on the brink of a blush.

And then one morning, very casually—much too casually it seemed to me—I said, "I am thinking of going to Italy," and my father said, "That seems an excellent idea," and my mother shrugged her

shoulders and thought it very rude to chuck a lot of engagements for a whim.

A week later I was living in a village inn basking in the sunshine surrounded by smiling teeth and laughing eyes, handkerchiefed heads and bare feet. The country was covered with furry anemones and outbursts of blossom. The weather was behaving like an irrepressible coquette with a heart of gold. Raucous street singing with its peculiarly poignant quality kept me happily awake at night. I was going through one of these delightful periods without to-morrow or yesterday when life is a happy island cut off from birth or death.

All the time I knew that in the hills above me was Maddalena's chateau with her wonderful garden climbing slowly down the hill terrace by terrace. The legend of her flowers was well known. They never—it was said—allowed the earth to peep through but sprawled and overlapped in riotous orgies, tumbling into blazing heaps of colour.

Being at a stone's throw from my goal had suddenly and strangely sapped my curiosity. I felt no initiative, no energy, no hurry, rather a sense of procrastination—a longing to ward off the approaching crisis.

But time was slipping away in golden moments strung on a string of idleness. I made up my mind to act and taking my courage in both hands I wrote

a line to Maddalena asking whether I might go and see her.

She invited me to go to supper with her—on the pergola if it was warm enough. It would, she said, be a great pleasure to see me. . . .

When the night arrived, I felt a strange longing to run away. I felt that I was breaking the bubble by trying to take it in my hands, that I was dragging down romance into the dust by my inquisitiveness. When the hour came for me to start my heart seemed to be playing leap-frog, giving great irregular jumps, and I felt more nervous than I have ever felt before or since.

I walked slowly. The night was very dark, starless and cloudy with an ominous feeling in the air. The door was opened by a magnificent looking Arab dressed in snow white and I was shown into an immense sala which contained the great secret of emptiness and comfort, luxurious intimacy and magnificent spaciousness. The light was very dim but I could see huge masses of strangely mixed flowers which looked as if they had grown together like that—a special arrangement of God's.

I could distinguish the faint outline of a white figure closely draped in a shawl and the most beautiful arm I have ever seen silhouetted against the back of the sofa and falling into a cascade of long white fingers. As I approached the figure rose. I held my

breath and the next moment I was kissing Maddalena's hand. How shall I describe her as she etched herself on to my memory?

She stood there tall and strong and supple like some beautiful statue created as a vessel to hold life. It was only gradually that I dared look at her face and the first thing I found there was her smile—the sight of which must always have set a thousand smiles in motion.

I remember the queer way it had of beginning at one corner of her mouth and creeping slowly and stealthily to the other, and then sometimes it would break out simultaneously all along the line with a dazzling burst of radiance. I liked it best when it progressed mysteriously hardly touching her lips, like an echo or a shadow of something.

Her eyes were very strange, marbled orange and green, splashes of amber on a background of emerald jade, and her lashes were so thick that it was sometimes difficult to catch the darting gleams behind them.

I wish I could describe her.

Somehow it is impossible to give any idea of her tingling vibrating quality. The overcharged battery that one felt her to be. All the electric sparks of life that escaped from her, and underneath it all the swift strong current, the relentless water from which light is made.

That evening I was intoxicated. I didn't know what I was eating, what I was saying. I felt that I was some will-less mechanical performer in a dream. The flickering orange light of the tall yellow candles, the hard patches of magnesium made by the moon on the floor, the sound of her voice, low and velvety and drowsy as it were the soft wrapping that held her wonderful treasure—it all seemed woven into some strange pattern of life of which I was a part.

Maddalena talked of life, of love, of triumph, of loneliness, of longing—"What is Sehnsucht?" she said. "What is it one yearns for? It is to be able to do a thing for the first time again. And that is impossible. When I love what do I want? I want never to have kissed, never to have given myself before. It is in vain I say 'Never has it been like this—never before was I awake—I was a dummy in the hands of fate—now I am alive.' I was shut up perhaps but my outer petals were touched. Oh, my God, make me again the child I was—but he cannot answer."

It was then I heard her voice for the first time. Her marvellous voice that had suddenly burst loose into this note of passion. It receded again into its velvet cover and she went on more calmly.

"What are we to tell our children? How are they to know that the first accidental encounter with

life may take from them a treasure they will only learn about in forty bitter storm-tossed years. Those first gifts—those shy blossomings lovely in their unconsciousness—are surely but the squandering of something half alive, the foolish murder of a bud. Oh youth is a wicked, cruel thing—eating miracles with its breakfast and not knowing that they are not porridge.”

She paused and when she began again the edge of bitterness had gone from her voice. “Of course,” she said, “a real passion does purify you, does burn up a lot of dusty old relics. You shed your past experiences like a winter skin; you are renewed all through. But if your imagination plays tricks with you, in the very absoluteness of your surrender there is a gnawing pang. ‘If this were only the first kiss I had ever given.’ To men it is not so,” she added with a little smile, “to them it would appear that each kiss is swollen by all the others that have gone before,” and with a little laugh she got up and walked into the next room.

I didn’t say anything. I was frightened of interrupting her—of giving the conversation a jerk.

Soon she began again.

“Middle age is the period of love,” she said a little sadly. “It comes over you like a fever. It is made a necessity by your doubts, by all the little guarantees that you have lost. When I was young I liked

power, I liked fame, I liked great men—statesmen, artists, kings even—I liked my horses and my jewels, ball-room and chandeliers, and the murmur of my name buzzing from person to person when I appeared. It amused me to drive around Hyde Park beautifully dressed, with a sunshade bursting over my head. I liked flowers, not only in gardens but in bouquets and vases, peaches, white grapes, caviare, and champagne. I enjoyed the merry-go-round of youth and success. Then your father came and I cared only for him—and my voice—‘his’ voice I used to call it because he loved it. My art meant much more to me after that, every note was a gift I could make him and I thanked God every day very humbly, very reverently for giving me such a marvellous instrument for my love.”

Suddenly, she became quite silent. A brooding look in her eyes, an immobility about her whole figure.

Thus we sat for what seemed to me an eternity. There were a thousand things I wanted to ask. When had she broken with my father and why? How had she been able to give up singing, what was her husband like, was she happy? They were all crude, impossible questions and would look angular in however many layers of subtlety I might wrap them.

All my life I have been teased for asking not,

"Is she beautiful?" "Is she clever?" but always, "Is she happy?" I think it is in many ways the most interesting thing about a person, the most complete description. If you first try and get a certain sense of the whole you can always disentangle the ingredients later. Happiness is a light, an atmosphere, an illumination. It sets a personality. I always feel that it is a creation that is difficult for some and easy for others, but essentially an achievement, never an accident. In a way you could never say that Maddalena was "happy" or "unhappy." You felt when you were with her that for the first time you were in contact with "life"—that she contained some elemental force, some spark, some current that made her a part of all the ages.

I don't know how to describe what I mean. You couldn't imagine her having been born or dying, having been a child or becoming an old woman. There was nothing finite about her. I was obsessed by the necessity of breaking the silence. If I didn't I felt that gradually I should lose control of my tongue and probably all of my limbs as well. I must break the spell.

Abruptly, without any warning, feeling superlatively foolish, I blurted out, "Do you ever sing now?"

She looked at me with wide open eyes. "No," she said. "My husband could stand no rival. He

wanted our love to be everything. It has been everything. He says that in my speaking voice are all the songs of the world. He—how shall I explain it—he reversed the plan of my life. Before, I had tried to expand the treasures of my own life, my little personal intimacies into the infinite. I sang my love for your father into every opera house in the world but Giovanni said, ‘No, you must capture the infinite and keep it tight shut in our love,’ and so it has been.”

I imagined the jealous lover, the Italian stage character caging the marvellous bird. It made me angry, indignant. What right had he to keep this wonderful treasure for himself.

“Giovanni is a poet,” she murmured—on her lips his name was a caress. “He is a doctor,” she added with a delightful little defiant note of pride.

“Signora,” I said, “I am going to make an impossible, a monstrous request. I have no right to make it, it is impertinent beyond words. What excuse have I to try to force the lock that reveals the Holy of Holies. I am a presumptuous fool. But if you’ve ever known what it was to feel hungry, if you’ve ever known what it was to feel parched with thirst, if you’ve ever known what it was to long, to yearn for anything, a letter, a look, a death, that is what I feel now. The whole of me is crying, ‘I must hear her voice once.’”

"I don't sing," she said smiling at my trembling eagerness.

"In memory of my father, who loved you as he has never loved anyone, to whom you were life itself. Because of my love for him, of his love for me, open this ecstasy of his to me so that there is not always between us this gulf of the wonder he knew and that I shall never know."

"It has been shut up so long, my voice," she said. "Who knows but it has forgotten how to fly?" And then suddenly she got up, her eyes flashed, she defied the universe with a gesture.

"Who says I cannot sing?" she said, and she went to the piano. Slowly she rumbled out a wavelike murmur of notes. "It is a man's song I must sing," she said, and she burst out into the flood of passion.

"Du meine Seele, du mein Herz," she sang.

Her wonderful voice vibrating, throbbing, crashed discord after discord. For a moment I thought it must be a nightmare—it could not be true. The agony was too great. She laughed, "It has not gone, my voice. Ah, it is good to sing again." She went on from song to song, and by a superhuman effort of will I kept my hands from my ears. And then suddenly I saw a man's white miserable strained face and her husband came into the room. She did not see him and he came straight to me.

"Fool," he said in a low passionate voice, with a burning bitterness in it. "She does not know. She is deaf when she sings. She has lost her ear. Oh, my secret!"

XV

THE BALL

SHE rested before dinner—or rather she lay in a dark room, feeling the strings of her heart and mind slowly tightening. “I mustn’t get overtuned,” she thought with a little smile. “I mustn’t get sharp,” and then trying to lash her soaring daydreams to earth, “perhaps I shall never be as happy as I am now,” but they raced away from her and circled in the air. She could hear the clock ticking and her heart beating and she could wish that one or the other would stop.

A feeling of sickness and faintness was gradually coming over her, an even more assertive oppressive sense of excitement. She wished that she could break loose from time. It seemed to her an eternity before her maid came. Her bath soothed her a little. Some of her growing tension evaporated in the warm water. She felt calmer, more at peace. She thought she was dressing very slowly—but her trembling fingers were out of her control and it was with feverish, unconscious haste that she dabbed her face with powder and put meaningless, unnecessary hairpins in superfluous ineffective places. A little stab of pleasure went through her as she put

on her new pink shoes and stockings. She was glad that her pink tulle dress had only just been lovingly extricated from layers and layers of tissue paper, "fold after fold to the fainting air," she murmured as the bed was flooded with crisp rosy billows. She looked at her little black satin head, the waves of which seemed painted in oil, and she tucked a real camellia with its dark green satin leaves, above her ear. "It is the stiffest and most romantic of flowers," she thought, "with its marvellous ballroom *tenue* and its beautiful insolent carriage."

At last she was ready. Her dress seemed part of her, waves of filmy petals from which emerged the classic mouldings of her marble shoulders—warm and white and firm like her breasts. Her tiny head was carried erect on its slender white stalk, her little satin feet twinkled below the billows. She was vibrating all through with electric currents of ecstasy. Her eyes were shining. Colour was coming and going in her cheeks; unconsciously her lips curved into smiles.

When she arrived everything was already in full swing. A faint background of music could occasionally be heard through the conversation on the staircase, roses and lilies of the valley competed in the dizzying atmosphere, chandeliers seemed but the natural extensions of rivières and tiaras and plaques—velvets and satins and tinsels made puddles in the

parquet, while in cool green corners low, provocative laughs followed up veiled provocative glances.

A gathering recklessness seemed to be taking hold of the evening—defiant challenges were being defiantly accepted—many an unspoken surrender was tacitly asked for and tacitly given—silent irrevocable promises were being sealed without a word—debts of honour indeed, since even dishonour seemed a small price with which to pay them. Rose floated to the top of the staircase with a delightful feeling that her feet had not touched the ground. Soon she was whirling round the room, her body abandoned to the music, her eyes searching every corner, examining each couple.

At last she saw him, but always he seemed far away, at the other end of the room, caught in a different stream of dancers. “When will he see me?” she thought, tragedy engulfing her, and then he caught her eye and bowed. She could not believe that he had not touched her; she had felt a physical impact and she shut her eyes to steady herself.

The music stopped.

“Shall we go out into the cool?”

She looked round and seeing him still in the room, she said:

“I think I would like to stay here a moment and look at the world,” and then as she saw him walk out again she added:

"Perhaps you are right; it is very hot."

He was sitting on a sofa, laughing and talking. She tried to keep control of her eyes, not to let her answers get too disjointed. At last someone came to talk to his companion and he got up. Her heart sang "He is coming to me," but he passed down the room.

The Prince in whose honour the ball was given, asked her to dance with him. She circled round and round, the centre of all eyes, the envied of all women. She wondered whether *he* saw her, what he was thinking about, whether he was glad that she was a success, if he realised that the woman he was with would rather be dancing with the Prince, whereas she, Rose, in the whole wide world only wanted to be with him.

She saw him walk out on to a balcony and now she was completely wretched. The night seemed full of romantic possibilities, the darkness had eaten him up out of her sight, she dared not think what confessions the stars might not be extracting from him. She could not bear to sit still for a moment, she danced and danced and danced till her pink satin feet were tired and dirty and her nerves gave little stabbing pains on a background of leaden misery.

Again and again the Prince came to her.

"What a success that child is," she heard a dowager snap out resentfully.

"It is certainly her night," agreed her companion, crushing his monocle into his eye.

Rose gave a weary little laugh. A thousand ages of frustration weighed her down and then suddenly when complete hopelessness had descended on her he came.

"Will you dance with me?" he asked.

His voice lulled her to sudden peace. All the raging, tearing miseries inside her suddenly subsided. She took his arm as in a dream, the parquet had suddenly become a gilded cloud and her body had ceased to exist. She smiled at him as if the peace of full happiness had descended on her for ever. His eyes seemed to draw her in, out of the world into eternity. She was conscious of nothing but his hand on her back. It grew every minute more immense and fiery while her body seemed to have shrunk and become a plaything that he was holding in his palm. Each of his fingers was portentously alive, the pillars on which the world was resting and each time he moved one a little shiver of fire went through her. Proudly, radiantly she looked round the room.

"Everyone is envying me," she thought.

"I don't know who that rather insignificant looking man that Rose has got hold of now is," snapped the dowager.

Round and round the room they went.

"I must take him right away before the music

stops, or someone will snatch him from me," thought Rose, "but oh! I don't want to be out of his arms—ever."

"Shall we go and sit down somewhere cool?" she asked him, and they walked out of the room.

He told her a story about his father and her low voice was musical with her happiness. She didn't mind what he talked about—she only wanted him to talk to her—whatever interested him was the most important thing in the world. He was the first person who had ever felt anything or done anything or had a father. She didn't want ever to move again——.

"Ah," said the Prince, "I have found you at last. Will you come to supper with me?"

A rush of disappointment and rage came over her.

"You are too kind, but I am so tired that I am going home."

"You need a little champagne," he said, taking her arm. Hopelessly she gave way, throwing behind her a little glance of appeal which said "later," but after supper she saw him sitting on a far-off sofa talking to an old friend. "He doesn't love her," she consoled herself. "They have known one another so long." Exhausted, she tore herself from the agony and ecstasy of his presence, and leaning back in her motor she said, "After all we were perfectly happy together. He never would have talked

like that about his father if he hadn't loved me—a little," she added, trying to be impartial.

She reached her bedroom and turned on the electric light. Vivisectionist, cold, fishlike daylight was forcing its way relentlessly through chinks in the curtains. The rosy shades of her lamps couldn't drive it away. She shivered. Her ball dress lay on the chair like a dead bird. Her satin shoes were frayed and dirty, the camellia, limp and brown, lay among a sprawling mass of hair pins.

The grey dispassionate eyes of dawn ruthlessly examined the debris of her ecstasy.

She turned off the light and huddled into bed.

"He talked to such dull women. After all you keep away from the people you really love at a ball. You want your secret to be inviolate and you don't want to make your beloved conspicuous."

She thought of the old friend she had left him talking to—"such an old friend," she murmured, to reassure herself.

She remembered the things he had said about his father. She remembered that he had told her that she had a whimsical smile—to this treasure she clung and slowly it began to make her feel happier. "A whimsical smile," she smiled to herself, and applying the balm to all the sore places of her consciousness, she fell asleep.

XVI

FRAGMENT OF A CORRESPONDENCE

1

FROM HER TO HIM

12 p. m. October 25th.

PARTIR c'est toujours mourir un peu. As your train left the station I felt that it was taking away not only you but whole bits of me—bits of my heart and my soul and certain special smiles and laughs. My voice doesn't sound the same. All of its low velvety whispering quality has gone. I don't like hearing it—it is like an empty box or an uncut book.

I went home so wearily, feeling that my limbs were merely weights which I had to carry, not as I do with you that my body is the covering of a current, a sheath into which I have put my spirit.

At dinner I wore my yellow dress that you don't like, and I pulled my hair back from my forehead viciously. I looked a fright.

Count G—— sat next to me. "You are wonderful," he said. "You have abandoned easy loveli-

ness for the mystery and perfection of a Chinese masterpiece."

I could have hit him. Several people came up later and told me that I was strangely beautiful. V—— asked me to let him paint me. I hated it. It made me feel as if I were committing an infidelity. To-morrow I will do my hair untidily and becomingly. I will wear all the dresses you love—and no one will notice them, because I have worn them so often.

God bless you.

E.

2

11 A. M., October 26th.

It is such a lovely day. A real October day, shot with red gold-dust, a stillness so absolute that the leaves look painted on air.

I wish it were grey and cold and windy—— I feel very unshot with gold myself. My grapevine of bubbles has become a mere refuse of soap on the surface of the water. How nasty it sounds! What I mean is that there are twelve hours of the day still to be lived through before I can begin sleeping and dreaming again—and that during those twelve hours I shall have to dress and put hair pins in my hair and tell the motor where to go to and talk and listen and laugh and behave as if I were

alive. And there won't be any plans—only engagements—and there won't be any clothes—only clothing—and everyone will say the same thing in the same voice.

And you will be in the train reading and dozing and looking very warily before you leap into conversation with a casual stranger. Do you remember how cross you were when I had that long, intoxicating talk with that stray Armenian?

I promise you that the scum of the earth wouldn't tempt me to-day if you were here. What more can I say?

Are you thinking of me at this very moment? Are you writing to me? I feel that there are no unsent letters in your life. Is that unkind?

God bless you.

E.

3

2 A. M., October 26th.

It is of course October the 27th, but I don't feel as if it were. The day, I need hardly say, was fifteen hours long, and the hours were longer than anything you could imagine. The clock never seemed to strike, no one ever seemed to leave, everything resolutely refused to come to an end.

At dinner I put on the most wonderful gramo-

phone record of myself—it seemed the only thing to do—and afterward I played bridge. I tried to feel that I was God battling with Providence, and that the green baize table was staging life in miniature (that is what you ought to feel when you are gambling), but I couldn't feel anything except that I was holding a lot of absurd dead bits of cardboard in my hand, and that I was apparently winning money perfectly automatically at a tremendous rate.

When I came to bed I was as tired as one only is when the surface of one's mind has been working perfectly without being fed by real attention and interest.

Have you arrived? Are you in bed asleep or subconsciously wondering why the telephone doesn't ring and a whispering voice like the rustle of a curtain isn't saying "Good-night—God bless you, always,"—which of course it is.

E.

4

FROM HIM TO HER

October 30th.

I was so glad to get your excellent letter. The journey was incredibly cold and the light went out every time the train slowed down. I tried to read a pamphlet on plebiscites, but soon gave it up in

favour of a detective novel, and then sleep. The train was a patchwork of nationalities, but I fared fairly well with an Italian Major in my compartment, with whom I could practise my Italian. You would have been perfectly happy picking up undesirable acquaintances, but as you know, I haven't your gifts. I found a lot of things waiting for me here. My agent had come down from Scotland and we had to go into all sorts of estimates and things. I should have liked your advice.

I met your friend H—— in the street. He said he had rather gathered you were not very well, but I told him that was not the case. He then asked me if you were happy, which seemed to me odd—not to say impertinent. I can't think what you see in him. To me he is like a hysterical woman.

Take care of yourself. Bless you.

M.

5

FROM HER TO HIM

October 29th.

I haven't had a line from you—not even a wire. I don't know whether you are dead or alive—or rather I do know, as presumably I should have heard if you were dead. Why don't people take the

trouble to let you know that they are alive? It is so much more important. The whole system is wrong. No sooner do I die, than all the flowers I have ever longed for in life pour in. Everyone says all of the nice things that I would so have loved to have repeated to me; my enemies and even my friends forgive me, charitable memories collect everything that is charming and overlook everything that is not—and why? Simply because I am no longer there to be made happy.

Meanwhile here I am without a snowdrop or a letter, trying to remember nice things that you said to me months ago, and succeeding in remembering nasty things you said to me weeks or even days ago. In fact I am cold and depressed and cross and disappointed and ungrateful.

Also I am in the state when I can't help talking about you—not necessarily to say important things—in fact of course, I have nothing to say about you—but because I like having your name on my lips, because I like hearing it on other people's.

Promise not to write me the "Where-is-it-all-to-end" sort of letter, or the certificate kind: "You don't know what our intimacy has meant to me." I know the "J" would be the end of everything—or rather the end of me and the beginning of someone else. My dear one, I am not abusing you for not writing—don't imagine that—and I don't mind

what you say when you do (that is probably not true). I only want to see your beloved writing to know you were thinking of me; to know that you are alive and well and even happy.

You see— well, God bless you.

E.

6

FROM H. TO E.

November 3rd.

Beloved Lisa:

I met your friend M in the street. Must you love him? Do you love him? Am I being impertinent? Must you like him? Do you like him? Am I being silly? I foolishly stumbled into sincerity—he was very chilly. I called you “Lisa” and he called you “Lady Raeburn.” I told him you weren’t well, which was idiotic of me as he naturally must have known whether it was true or not (are you well?), and I asked him if you were happy. I know it was outrageous but there was something about his spats that got my nerves. Lisa, can you bear his spats? Think how you hate spats or won’t even that do any good?

I wish you weren’t as wretched as I know you are. Lisa, darling blessed, there is never anything I can do, is there?

H.

7

FROM HIM TO HER

November 5th.

What a wonderful correspondent you are, with your unerring sense of the right word and the most expressive phrase. Thank you for your letters. It is always good to hear from you.

London is very foggy and cold. I have just been north and tried to settle things up. Do you remember talking to me about a young MacDonald? Would he be any use as an agent? I would be very glad of your opinion, and also of his address. My plans are unsettled and the F. O. seems in no hurry. Here everything is very gloomy and the industrial situation looks blacker every day. I met your friend S—— the other day. He has been making a series of the most mischievous speeches, and I would have preferred not to shake hands with him. However, out of deference to you I did, but when he called you by your Christian name I would have liked to have kicked him. Charity and curiosity seem to me to lead you, if not astray, at any rate in very queer directions sometimes.

Don't think I am being censorious. You are you. Bless you.

M.

8

FROM HER TO HIM

November 2nd.

I have just had a letter from you, at last. Such a characteristic, impersonal, discreet letter. From where do you get your almost legal sense of the potential possibilities of the written word? All the same, I love hearing from you because I think, "What does it matter what he writes? At each word he is thinking of me, so one word is the same as another." I'd love to have given your agent my advice and he would have loved getting it. In fact I should have been invaluable. Can't I send you an agricultural opinion by post?

Dear one, I'm teasing you. I love you to ask me what I think about anything—always.

I'm sorry you don't like H. I knew you never would. He is perhaps a little over-anxious to think that one is in a draught—in life, I mean—but it is a delicious fault. All of the little chinks in my time, that were kept so carefully and lovingly and religiously for a possible you, are now filled in. In fact, hope has been taken out of my days and they are very full.

Remember that a letter from you is the only thing in life that can happen to me.

God bless you.

E.

9

E. TO H.

November 6th.

There are so many things you can do for me. To begin with you can be alive, which makes me happier every time I think of it. And then you can always make me laugh which is the most divine of all gifts. Then, too, you love me a little, which is a very great and undeserved joy to me. And of course you are the best friend in the world.

Do you think you could ever bring yourself to like M——? It would be delightful for me if you could but don't try if the effort is to be too great. It is true he does wear spats—and I still don't like them.

Yes, I am afraid I must love him. It is as you surmise, incredibly inconvenient. Still, I am only wretched in proportion to my happiness, so you mustn't be sorry for me any more. But you must please still be fond of me.

Lisa.

10

FROM HER TO HIM

November 7th.

Another letter from you! Almost—not quite—a love letter. “You are you.” My dear, what a confession in print! How indiscreet you are becoming. You really must be more careful.

So “curious and charitable” are your recipe for me—or rather for my habit of making undesirable friends. Curious I certainly am. Charitable, perhaps. I wonder. Or tolerant, or understanding? Intellectually interested and morally lazy is probably the right definition. The thought of charity in connection with S. makes me smile. Even I with my passionate belief that the great successes are usually the real incompris have never made that claim for him. Why he isn’t even lonely—surely an unpardonable omission in a crusader; and he is that, though you prefer to think of him as an agitator—which of course he is too. So are we all, if we believe enough in our ideas—or have any ideas to believe in.

This is not an attack on the other ideal of life—yours—even sometimes mine. I know that public service is a wonderful thing, that the civil service is the epic of England, our only just claim to our

Empire. No other country in the world has its cream so proud to be cast for invisible rôles. I think my nationalism is based on wonder and gratitude for that. Also, I am mixing my metaphors and writing a treatise. Worse than that, I am defending your own case to you, when I had meant to write an eloquent plea for the picturesque.

But to return to S. He is absolutely sincere and absolutely disinterested—both things you love. Do open the windows at the back of your mind and give the view your careful and loving consideration. There are so many roads without avenues or lodge gates or even sign posts. S. will always go across country—and I asked him to call me by my Christian name. I was dreadfully afraid he might refuse, but he didn't.

Shall I write and tell him never to do it to you, but to try and remember that you are the early Nineteenth Century English gentleman, or would it be easier for him if he tried to think of you as a butler?

Oh, my dear, what a glorious day it will be when you first like one of my odd friends! As for yours, I am never allowed to see them—the females ones, I mean. I should hate the sheltered life you like for me if it didn't usually land us in a tête-à-tête. So after all, I say "Long live your proscriptions"!

God bless you.

E.

November 9th.

To-day is the Lord Mayor's show day, isn't it? What funny things calendars remember days by. Some day I will write one of my own.

September 30th. M said, "I hope your child will be like you—not quite so clever perhaps but with all your exquisite tenderness."

October 3rd. M said, "However strained our relations may be I can't help the delight I take in being with you—my joy in the light of your mind."

October 6th. M said, "If I take you to that restaurant you mustn't look all round you with your whimsical smile."

October 8th. M said, "You would have been a good soldier because you have imagination, humanity and no sentimentalism."

October 10th. M said, "I can't understand your absence of discretion and caution, your imperviousness to what people think. I like hiding my treasure. You think that if a thing is good it doesn't matter how many people see it—I think your attitude makes life very difficult."

That was a defeat. But I suppose my calendar ought to have defeats registered too.

I wonder if I could remember 365 nice things that

you have said to me. I think that if you have said them I could. Some night I will try and then when I can't get beyond twenty-five I shall assume that I have lost my memory.

Madame de S—— said you were charming and that you ought to marry and I said "Yes," rather vaguely, and then—as women always do in those circumstances—that you were very difficile and asked for so much—by the "so much" of course they mean themselves. I love hearing Phoebe say with a little self-conscious smirk, "John asks for *everything* in a woman," as if everything were eternally and inevitably synonymous for Phoebe. I am so glad that I recognise all the tricks of my trade in myself, as I do get such fun out of following them in my friends.

I oughtn't to write like this to you ought I? It really is sad to think that through all your various adventures you believed in women—till you met me—and I am hardly even an adventure. It is rather a pretty theme that it requires une honnête femme to shatter your illusions.

I forgot to tell you that Mme. de S—— said that women without temperament fell like ninepins—I see her point. If you regard yourself as a gift and there is no physical indulgence concerned you can entangle the whole thing in what is probably a fictitious sort of nobility. I think I shall teach my chil-

dren to beware of the cult of generosity. It is a dangerous thing.

God bless you.

E.

12

FROM HIM TO HER

November 9th.

Thank you for your admirable eulogy of the civil service. "Invisible rôles" is excellent though we diplomats certainly get the best of it there. S. may be everything that you say but what a pity that ability and disinterestedness should serve such a cause. I am still old-fashioned enough to think that what you believe in is important.

Here it is cold and grey. The F. O. haven't made up their mind where to send me, my agent's reports are most discouraging and altogether I am in the blues. All the accounts of you are dazzling as always. I heard of a battle of wits between you and Briand. How much you get out of life! How do you do it? I am getting very middle-aged. What a vitalizer you are. I wish I could go round and be stimulated by you.

Bless you.

M.

13

FROM HER TO HIM

November 11th.

I have just had your dear letter saying that you wished you could come round and see me. Imagine what I feel about it! Why are you depressed dearest and best? What can I do for you? Give your agent advice? I very nearly got into the train and went to you. I wonder what deterred me? Could it have been the Channel? That really would have been to allow my sea-sickness too much importance. Could it have been the almost insuperable difficulties of producing an excuse for suddenly rushing over to London? Could it have been a slight lurking fear that your mood might have changed by the time I arrived? I don't think it could have been that. You know how ridiculously disproportionately I always believe in your wanting to see me.

At any rate, remembering that in your view cowardice is the better part of recklessness, here I am leading what you so civilly describe as a dazzling life. Isn't success a strange thing, always rushing at you in the wrong shape at the wrong time? Mine has always come to me on the highways when I have

wanted it on the byways. I wish you were here. I wish I were there. I wish we were anywhere.

Bless you,

E.

14

FROM HIM TO HER

November 13th.

I have had two letters from you—one with your calendar and a characteristic attack on your own sex and the other running down your own success. What you seem to forget is that with you by-ways inevitably become highways. You take the most obscure looking lane and no sooner do you set foot on it than you transform it into the main road. How you manage your life at all I don't know, with searchlights turned on to you from all sides and an incurable tendency to behave as if you were in the dark. But there you are, in spite of it all, with more friends than anyone.

I suppose I must content myself with the formula that with your outrageous vanity you insist on regarding as a compliment. You are you.

Bless you,

M.

15

FROM HER TO HIM

November 16th.

The most wonderful thing has happened. Can you guess what it is? How long can I go on writing without telling you? For pages and pages I hope. Your last letter was delightful almost, if I dare suggest it, uncharacteristically so, by which of course I mean that your letters in a book of memoirs would not be considered enchanting. I think that everyone would say, "How curious that she should have loved him so much when he obviously didn't care for her. And what a stiff stilted man." Whereas I know that it is not in the least curious that I should love you as much as I do and that, in an odd unsatisfactory adorable way of which you are sometimes and I am always conscious, you do care for me. How could they know that your letters are really love letters? That when you tell me about your agent you are saying "I love you," and that when you are talking about S's pernicious speeches it is equivalent to a "my *own* precious darling." I emphasise the 'own' because it is, I think, the S. complex. Aren't I vain to-day? Vainer almost than ever before. That is because I

am happy—singly, dancingly happy. Happy with all the glorious moments that are coming to me and that being in my mind are already here. The fact is—no, I don't want to tell you just yet. The Ambassador praised you tremendously to me last night. I was silent with pleasure and then feeling that something was expected of me I said "He is a very old friend of mine," which is not, I suppose, quite accurate, as we have only known one another for nine months. But it is true all the same—and why should I conceal the real truth from the Ambassador? He then said that you ought to marry, which is always a tactless thing to say about an unmarried man to any married woman. I was disgusted but I let him go on talking about "nice" girls (whatever that may mean!) until we were interrupted. He then went away with a triumphant expression, no doubt saying to himself "I have taken the bull by the horns," which I daresay he did, but the bull is still in the same place.

I can't go on any longer; I must tell you. I am coming to London for a whole week! Think of it—on the days when I positively must do things you will be the cement and on the days when I only ought to be doing things you will be the bricks, and all the time there will be odd moments which will be ours, yours and mine, and long hours and unexpected times—— And—I am coming alone—I

shall be able to ring you up at night and whisper "God bless you."

Everyday and all day I plan my week and fill it fuller and fuller of you—and already almost I am beginning to cry at the thought that it will come to an end. Oh, my dearest, I am glad I am alive.

Bless you,
E.

TELEGRAM FROM HIM TO HER.

Please wire what train you come by.
M.

TELEGRAM FROM HER TO HIM.

Arrive Friday 7:50.
Blessings,
E.

THE END

